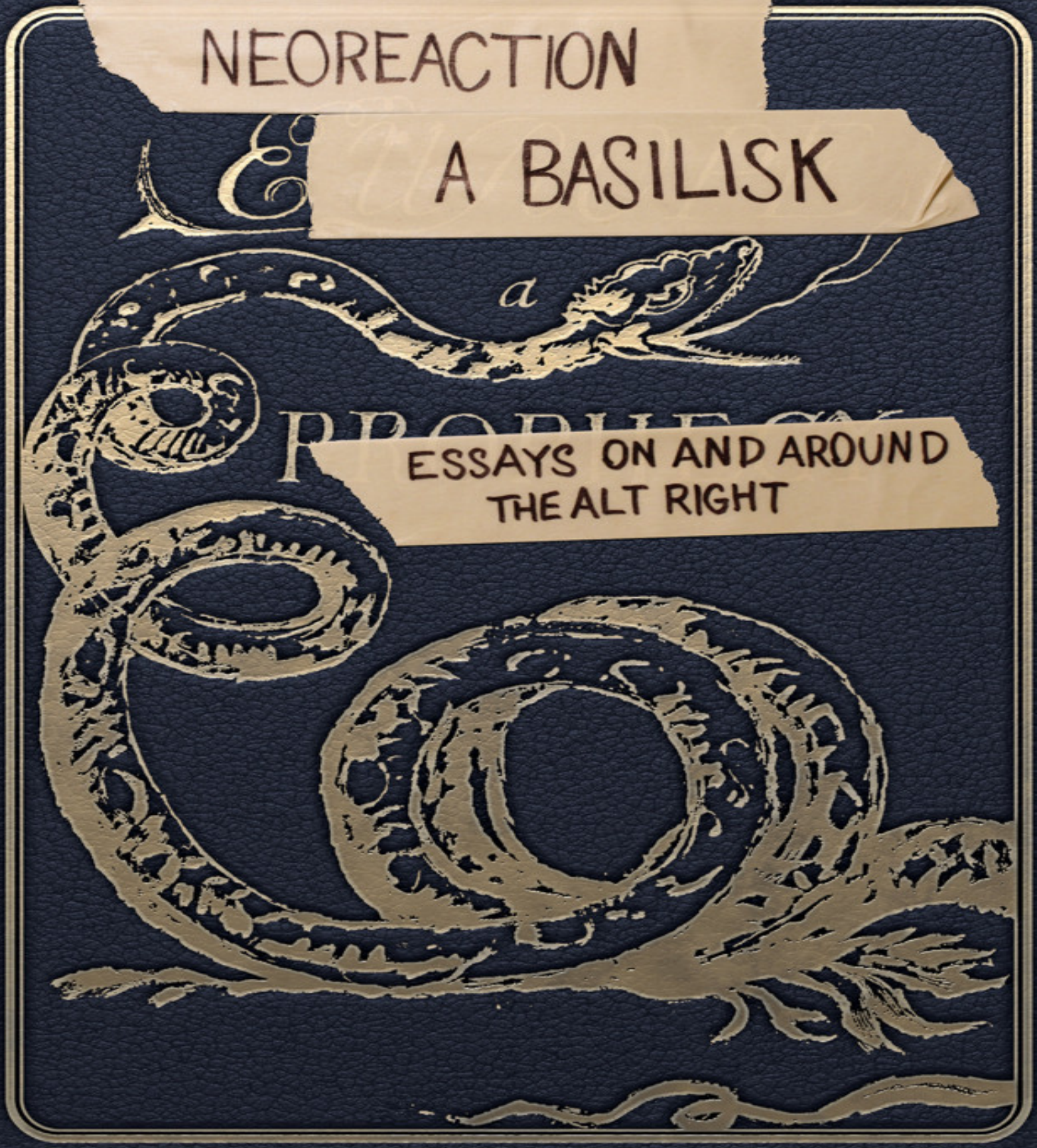
NEOREACTION & A BASILISK



ESSAYS ON AND AROUND THE ALT RIGHT

ELIZABETH SANDIFER

Neoreaction a Basilisk
Essays On and Around the Alt-Right

Elizabeth Sandifer

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To the ghosts and the witches

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Introduction

When I started this book, it was fun. An opportunity to connect some philosophical ideas I'd been playing with, using some very silly right-wing nutjobs who were nevertheless kind of pathologically interesting. The book came in a joyful burst of late-night writing, holed up in a candle-lit room tapping away on my laptop, letting it all pour out of some strange and liminal space I still don't entirely understand. Then everything went to shit, and suddenly a book about far-right nutjobs stopped being quite as much fun and became somewhat more important.

This is not the first book on the alt-right to come out, although the main essay was finished in May of 2016 and distributed to Kickstarter backers shortly thereafter. But the bulk of books (and articles) on the matter so far have focused on two questions that I find relatively uninteresting. The first is how the alt-right came to happen. It's possible to write intelligently on this history—David Neiwert's *Alt-America* does an excellent job of tracing the evolution of the far-right from the mid-90s to the present day, for instance. But ultimately the question is fairly easy to answer: far-right movements arise when the established order starts to crack. (This is also a good time to weigh in on the terminology "alt-right," which some have, not without reason, complained masks the fact that we're talking about a neo-nazi movement. This is true, but equally, no iteration of far-right uprisings is entirely like another, and while historical comparison is essential, so is having a specific term for the enemy we're fighting today. Alt-right has become the consensus term, and there are higher priorities than complaining that we should have picked a better one.) This does not mean, as far too many commentators have suggested, that the people at Trump rallies making Hitler salutes are motivated by "economic anxiety." They're motivated by racism. Duh. But their racism is emboldened by a political order that visibly has no answers, is running just to keep still, and not even managing that. The path to the mainstream that this

particular batch of racists took is worth documenting as a matter of historical record, but the question invites missing the forest for the trees.

The cautionary tale in this regard is Angela Nagle's appalling *Kill All Normies*, which takes the jaw-droppingly foolish methodology of simply reporting all of the alt-right's self-justifications as self-evident truths so as to conclude that the real reason neo-nazis have been sweeping into power is because we're too tolerant of trans people. From this spectacularly ill-advised premise Nagle makes the inevitable but even worse conclusion that the obvious thing to do is for the left to abandon all commitment to identity politics (except maybe feminism which, as a white cis woman, Nagle has at least some time for).

This brings us to our second relatively uninteresting question, which is what to do about the alt-right. In this case the answer is even easier and more obvious than the first: you smash their bases of power, with violent resistance if necessary. If you want a more general solution that also takes care of the factors that led to a bunch of idiot racists being emboldened in the first place you drag all the billionaires out of their houses and put their heads on spikes.

But the ease of answer reveals the deeper problem with "what's to be done" as an angle on the alt-right. We all know what's to be done. Nazis have been the go-to example for people arguing why sometimes violent resistance is necessary for decades. But in the absence of a credible resistance that consists of more than hashtags and an inexplicable propensity to take Louise Mensch seriously the knowledge of what we should do is fairly useless. We're not doing it, and I am to say the least skeptical that screaming "for fuck's sake, just bash the fucking nazis' skulls in already" for the next 350 pages would magically kickstart a mass uprising.

Instead this book asks a different question: if winning is off the table, what should we do instead? Because the grim reality is that things look really fucking bad. Ecological disaster is looming, the geopolitical order is paralyzed, and we're not putting nearly enough billionaire heads on spikes to plausibly change it. What then, is left?

This is not a question with straightforward answers. Straightforwardness is for victors who get statues and ballads. The defeated operate from shadows and hidden places, and the legacies they leave are cryptic and secret. This book behaves accordingly, and there are limits to what I am willing or indeed able to explain. Nevertheless, a brief overview.

There are seven essays in this book. They do not directly build on one another or trace a single argument, and are united more by approach and philosophical concerns than by topic per se. The main essay is the title piece,

and is the one I am most invested in allowing to stand on its own terms. That said, it focuses on two specific strands of thought within the alt-right: their own grappling with eschatology, and their roots in silicon valley tech culture (the latter of which is probably the thing that most distinguishes them from previous far-right movements). It takes as its starting point the work of neoreactionary thinkers Mencius Moldbug and Nick Land, along with Eliezer Yudkowsky (who is not on the alt-right but has a variety of interesting links to the topic). Its ending point is considerably more oblique.

"The Blind All-Seeing Eye of Gamergate" moves the focus from the philosophical and intellectual aspects of the alt-right to its blunt and practical end of vicious online harassment campaigns, looking at, as the title suggests, Gamergate, which in hindsight is increasingly clear as a watershed moment in their ascent.

"Theses on a President" tackles the obvious topic. It does not analyze Trump primarily in terms of the alt-right, but rather takes a psychogeographic approach to him, treating him as a pathological condition of New York City. I should note that it was written before the 2016 election, although the final three theses have been revised in light of the outcome.

"No Law for the Lions and Many Laws for the Oxen is Liberty" is first and foremost an opportunity for me to finally collaborate with my dear friend and colleague at Eruditorum Press, Jack Graham. It offers a more historically rooted perspective on it, looking at its long roots, both intellectual and material, the Austrian School of economics.

The next two essays—"Lizard People, Dear Readers" and "My Vagina is Haunted"—are not about the alt-right per se, but instead look at topics that are, in their own way, analogous. The former looks at the conspiracy theories of David Icke to muse on the value of crackpots and nutjobs. The latter looks at TERFs, a group of nominal feminists whose activism focuses largely on objecting to the existence of transgender women, and offers the book's most direct answer to the question "what do we do?"

The main collection ends with "Zero to Zero," which returns to the concerns of the first essay to look at Peter Thiel, the moneyman behind both Eliezer Yudkowsky and Mencius Moldbug, seeking to come to some final insight about our onrushing doom. I hope the book that results from juxtaposing these seven works provides some entertainment and insight while you wait for extinction.

Finally there is "Guided by the Beauty of Their Weapons," an earlier essay on the alt-right that is a precursor to the rest of the book. Although it does not entirely fit with the thematic concerns and approaches of the book, it

seemed prudent to collect all of my major works on the alt-right in one volume, and so I've included it here as an appendix.

-El Sandifer, November 26, 2017

Neoreaction a Basilisk

I.

"Do you know that every time you turn another page, you not only get us closer to the monster at the end of this book, but you make a terrible mess?"—Grover, *The Monster at the End of This Book*

Let us assume that we are fucked[1]. The particular nature of our doom is up for any amount of debate, but the basic fact of it seems largely inevitable. My personal guess is that millennials will probably live long enough to see the second Great Depression, which will blur inexorably with the full brunt of climate change to lead to a massive human dieback, if not quite an outright extinction. But maybe it'll just be a rogue AI and a grey goo scenario[2]. You never know.

There are several reactions we might have to this realization, and many of us have more than one. The largest class of these reactions are, if not uninteresting, at least relatively simple, falling under some category of self-delusion or cognitive dissonance. From the perspective of 2017 the eschaton appears to be in exactly the wrong place, such that we're either going to just miss it or only see the early "shitloads of people dying" bits. And even if it is imminent, there is no reason to expect most of us to engage with it differently than any other terminal diagnosis, which is to say, to minimize the amount of time we spend consciously dying. Indeed, my polite authorial recommendation would be to do exactly that if you are capable, probably starting by simply not reading this.

Hmm. Well, no one to blame but yourself, I suppose. A second category, marginally more interesting, is what we might call "decelerationist" approaches. (The name is a back formation from the accelerationists, more about whom later.) These amount to attempts to stave off the inevitable as best as possible, perhaps by attempting to reduce carbon emissions and engage in conservation efforts to minimize the impact of the anthropocene extinction or by writing fanfic to conjure the AI Singularity or something. These efforts are often compatible with active self-delusion, and in most regards the current political system is a broad-based coalition of these two approaches. But the

decelerationist is at least engaged in a basic project of good. I tend to think the project is doomed (although being wrong about that would be lovely), however, and this work is on the whole aimed at those who similarly feel somewhat unsatisfied with decelerationism.

From this point the numbering of categories becomes increasingly untenable as we enter the constellation of approaches to which this book is broadly directed—those whose reaction towards the eschaton is not simply or primarily an effort to evade it. This includes the outright accelerationists, whose attitude is that the eschaton should be brought about ASAP, but also those for whom the eschaton is an object of fantasy and dread—those who imagine it but do not necessarily wish to bring it about, and those who attempt to predict and plan for it, for whom the future, by definition almost but not quite present, hangs like looming weather, lurking like a memory.

This book is born out of a frustration with the genre of sprawlingly mad manifesto-like magnum opuses in this area, a genre that at times seems dominated, at least in terms of practical influence, by an AI crank, a racist technolibertarian, and a literal madman philosopher (literally). I do not mean to suggest that these constitute the entirety of significant eschatological thought, and certainly not the best of it. Indeed, I find all them at best unsatisfying and at worst loathsome for a variety of reasons, generally ones born of political leftism. Nor is it to suggest that there is some sort of coherent position these three thinkers map out; their influences on each other are substantial, and there's an entire school of thought (generally known as "neoreaction") that's heavily influenced by all three, but they are three distinct thinkers who have different and ultimately irreconcilable goals. They simply collectively form an object of definable scope, the exploration of which seems likely to yield some useful perspective on the end of all things. To start, then, let us look at the big three manifesto-writing visionaries alluded to above, namely Eliezer Yudkowsky, Curtis (aka Mencius Moldbug), and Nick Land.

We'll start with Eliezer Yudkowsky, who is the one of the three who is emphatically not a neoreactionist, and indeed prone to getting quite cross at the suggestion that he has anything to do with them. The official description of Eliezer Yudkowsky, and by this I of course mean the first sentence of his Wikipedia article, is that he "is an American artificial intelligence researcher known for popularizing the idea of friendly artificial intelligence." Being Wikipedia, most of this is almost right. The material bulk of Yudkowsky's output would make him best described as a science blogger, although "AI researcher" and "novelist" are both factually accurate, as is, for that matter, "American." And while friendly artificial intelligence is certainly an idea he's

discussed, it's a little hyper-specific to describe someone who is more broadly a popularizer of the AI Singularity, a sort of Ray Kurzweil for the millennialist set. His own website, meanwhile, begins with the description that he's "a man who wears more than one hat." If one wanted to be snarkily uncharitable—and if it's not clear, this is very much the sort of book that does—one could say that this is true, but that all of his hats are the same color and don't quite flatter.

But none of this quite captures the uncanny strangeness that makes Yudkowsky so compelling, both as a writer to take seriously and as a bizarre symptom to obsessively pick at in pursuit of obscure and likely disreputable goals. And however easy he is to mock (and any writer worth their salt is easy to mock), he is indeed both of these things. This strangeness comes from the sort of outsized ambition of his work. His largest single piece is a series of blog posts now collected as a six-volume book entitled *Rationality: From AI to Zombies*, but more typically known as the Sequences. Its title belies its scope slightly, in that it picks two disparate but fanciful things to form its range; it is of the largely abandoned genre of from-first-principles systemic philosophical worldviews, of a genuine intellectual heft comparable to Kant's Critiques, assuming you don't much care for Kant's Critiques.

Its best analogue, however, would be Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, a 17th century epic that attempted to derive the entirety of metaphysics and ethics via Euclid's method of geometric proofs, starting with rigorously expressed axioms and definitions and moving onwards to a coherent moral philosophy about the existence of God in all things. Yudkowsky, on the other hand, begins with a statistical notion called Bayes' theorem and ends with a futuristic godlike artificial intelligence that reincarnates a perfect simulation of you to live forever. (He's firmly in favor of this as a practical agenda, and is thus best classified as a decelerationist according to our rough schema.)

Bayes' theorem—no, don't worry, this isn't going to be a high-math book, I'm an English major—is a way of assessing the probability of something based on the probability of a related event. There's a lot of standard examples and explanations, but Yudkowsky's is actually really good—he uses an example about breast cancer rates, saying that 1% of women aged forty have breast cancer, 80% of those will get positive results on mammograms, and that 9.6% of healthy women will also get positives, then asks what the likelihood is that a woman who just got a positive mammogram actually has breast cancer. And he does the whole thing about how only about 15% of doctors actually get this problem right, and helpfully includes a JavaScript calculator widget at every step of the argument so that readers can play with the numbers as he's

explaining them. It's properly great science writing, accessibly explaining a cool and significant bit of statistics, at least to the sorts of people inclined to fiddle around with a JavaScript calculator whose instructions amount to "when in doubt, use parentheses." (It turns out that the odds are way lower than most people expect—only 7.8% of forty-year-old women with positive mammograms would have breast cancer with those numbers.)[3]

But there's something odd about how Yudkowsky sets this explanation up. He hypes it incredibly, as if it were the hottest basic concept going in mathematics right now. "What is the so-called Bayesian Revolution now sweeping through the sciences, which claims to subsume even the experimental method itself as a special case? What is the secret that the adherents of Bayes know? What is the light that they have seen? Soon you will know. Soon you will be one of us." The strange, cult-induction tone of this finish is rhetorical irony, to be sure, but there's an underlying sincerity. Yudkowsky really does believe this one weird trick about figuring out the relationships among probabilities constitutes the key to a fundamental realignment of human thought.

The way he gets from calculator widgets to an attempt to demonstrate this claim illustrates both the appeal and fundamental limitations of Yudkowsky's style. He frames the problem repeatedly, discussing how different phrasings of the same basic facts make people more or less likely to intuit how worrisome a positive mammogram actually is, providing the calculator again and again so that readers can fiddle the numbers until they understand the underlying principles of how you get 7.8%. And this is really his focus—how Bayes' theorem works, math-wise, is just a point established along the way to trying to establish how to talk about the problem so as to make Bayesian inference seem most intuitive.

The thing is, there's actually some pretty good cognitive science behind the idea that human brains instinctively work along Bayesian lines, and Yudkowsky is capable of effectively depicting that process. For instance, at one point in the Sequences he describes a hypothetical pundit preparing in advance for a TV show responding to an interest rate adjustment from the Federal Reserve. The pundit has a certain amount of time to prepare, and knows the possible reports he'd give based on the things the Fed might do, but has to figure out how much time to allot to preparing for each outcome. Yudkowsky describes the thought process thusly:

> And yet... even in your uncertain state of mind, it seems that you anticipate the three events differently; that you expect to need some excuses more than others. And—this is the fascinating part—when you think of something that makes it seem more likely that bond prices will go up,

> then you feel less likely to need an excuse for bond prices going down or remaining the same. It even seems like there's a relation between how much you anticipate each of the three outcomes, and how much time you want to spend preparing each excuse.[4]

It's a good account of the way a person intuitively budgets time, and sure enough can be related to Bayes' theorem. And Yudkowsky really is good at this sort of stuff.

His other magnum opus is an epic Harry Potter fanfiction entitled *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* that, while obviously sounding completely ridiculous, can't really be condemned in stronger terms than "it's not much worse than *Atlas Shrugged*." In this he applies his literary Bayesianism to a variety of children's fantasy plot logics in ways that are in turns amusing and, especially when the line between Yudkowsky and his reimagining of Harry Potter as rationalist child prodigy is at its thinnest, genuinely affecting.

But there's also a distinct problem when applied to the scale of the task Yudkowsky actually sets out on, which is a comprehensive account of why the most important problem currently facing mankind is figuring out how to teach an artificial intelligence to be friendly before we accidentally invent a super-AI that takes over the world and kills us all because, as he puts it in one of his most evocative sentences, "The AI does not hate you, nor does it love you, but you are made out of atoms which it can use for something else."[5] The appeal of Bayes' theorem is rooted in the existence of actual numbers under the hood. It's first and foremost an equation. But sci-fi scenarios like super-AIs don't actually have easily discernible probabilities attached to them, and no amount of wording your claims in ways that facilitate intuitive Bayesian inferences is going to magically introduce mathematical precision into a discussion of them.

That's not to say that Yudkowsky's literary Bayesianism isn't compelling; he uses it to effectively illustrate a number of common cognitive errors such as optimism bias. Indeed, this is where he largely made his name, on a pair of blogs called *Overcoming Bias* and *LessWrong* on which he originally serialized the Sequences. But it's still essentially a declaration that as long as you frame your sentences in a particular way you can successfully figure out anything, which is the same error that infects every from-first-premises work of philosophy ever.

In practice, what happens is that words are not mathematics, and so any such extended effort slowly accrues a myriad of poor phrasings. Most are small, niggling things, a quibble over a precise definition or a minor clarification to a summary. Others are more substantive, but still the sorts of things that could probably be hashed out in three or four e-mail exchanges. (Indeed, the comments on the original blog posts often consist of these

quibbles, though Yudkowsky tended not to be interested in being corrected.) But they add up, especially over the course of a lengthy work. This doesn't make the work less compelling; indeed, it is generally the strange implications generated by this process that makes philosophy an interesting literary genre. But it does mean that the meticulous precision promised at the start of such an endeavor always lies in tatters by the end, their work inevitably more valuable for its evocative properties than its rational ones.

And sure enough, from these helpful tips for avoiding cognitive bias, Yudkowsky inexorably slides towards something much weirder, such that by the end he's making claims about quantum mechanics and concluding that it's vitally important we try to build a friendly superintelligent computer that will preserve our souls for all eternity. To an outside observer, there's a certain absurdist demonstration to it. Yudkowsky starts from the premise that we are badly crippled by cognitive biases and then steadily lets his cognitive biases lead him to a ridiculous conclusion. To an inside observer, and Yudkowsky has attracted quite the following, once you have a litany of logical fallacies and cognitive biases that long, it's easy to find a reason to dismiss just about any objection you want to. Indeed, Yudkowsky builds out an extensive theory of "inferential distances" [6] that explains how you just can't meaningfully communicate with poor deluded fools who are several steps of the argument behind you, such that the opinions of people who have not completely understood all of the hundreds of pages of material leading up to a given conclusion (where understanding is demonstrated, of course, by agreeing with the conclusion) don't really matter in the first place, and can simply be told "you really should read the Sequences" and ignored until they stop disagreeing with you.

But there's a larger issue here: the literary from-first-premises structure isn't just always going to fall short of the immaculate precision of mathematics, it's also only ever been a literary genre, not a way people actually think. Eliezer Yudkowsky did not, in reality, sit down with Bayes' theorem one day and linearly work his way to the AI Singularity. He wanted to live forever in a computer, and set about designing a worldview that supported this goal. This is in no way a flaw in his worldview, but any understanding of his worldview that doesn't recognize that "I want to live forever in a computer" is a more fundamental premise than Bayes' theorem is lacking.

Still, Yudkowskian thought has its appeal, and indeed a significant community formed around his writing. Indeed, this is true in two very different regards. First, it's important to understand that Yudkowsky really

does believe that this friendly AI problem is the most important issue facing humanity, and so created a non-profit, originally called the Machine Intelligence Research Institute (MIRI) to research it—a non-profit that attracted some significant funding. Second, Yudkowsky's thought and style influenced a lot of people, and a sizeable community formed around his two sites, especially *LessWrong*. And it is this latter community from which the most spectacularly strange element of Yudkowsky's thought emerged.

Neil Gaiman postulates in *The Sandman* the existence of an ancient cult dedicated to Despair (the literal embodiment), the only one of its kind in history, which perished within two years as its tenets drove all of its members to suicide. This isn't quite what happened to *LessWrong*, but it's amusingly close. Or, if you prefer a more thematically on-point analogy, think of the scene in that sci-fi movie where they blow up the computer with a logical paradox. The lethal meme, known as Roko's Basilisk, used the peculiarities of Yudkowskian thought to posit a future AI that would condemn to eternal torture everyone from the present who had ever imagined it if they subsequently failed to do whatever they could to bring about its existence.

Theology buffs will recognize this as a variation of Pascal's Wager, which it was, but carefully tailored to work within a particular system, and deliberately framed in terms of the popular Internet meme of "the Game," where the only rules are that you lose any time you think about the Game, and that you must then announce having done so. But for all that its basic contours are familiar, it's crucial to realize that Roko arrived at his Basilisk honestly and sincerely, assembling premises widely accepted by the *LessWrong* community until he found himself unexpectedly transfixed by its gaze. The result was a frankly hilarious community meltdown in which people lost their shit as ideas they'd studiously internalized threatened to torture them for all eternity if they didn't hand all of their money over to MIRI, culminating in Yudkowsky himself stepping in to ban all further discussion of the dread beast. This went more or less exactly how anyone who has ever used the Internet would guess, which is to say that it quickly became the thing Yudkowsky and his followers were best known for. Those interested in the details can readily look them up, but suffice to say it was not the sort of incident from which one's school of thought recovers its intellectual respectability.[7]

But it's not as though the other strand of Yudkowsky's influence, MIRI, does much better for itself. While the institute has put out a couple of minor papers, there's a conspicuous lack of research on machine intelligence emerging from it. Aside from the problem that Yudkowsky is not actually a

brilliant programmer capable of making headway on the persistently difficult problems that have been facing artificial intelligence for decades, this is largely because the problem he identifies—how to make an AI friendlier—is simply not one that artificial intelligence research is currently in a position to grapple with. Not, as one would quickly surmise from even the most cursory look at science fiction about robots, because nobody has thought of this problem, but simply because real-world AI design sucks too much to even deal with it in a meaningful way.

But while MIRI has largely become a punchline since they recruited GiveWell, a major charity watchdog, to write a report on their effectiveness that ended up concluding they were actively hindering their ostensible cause[8], that doesn't mean that it's disappeared, or even that it's not well-funded. Indeed, for all his obvious deficiencies, Yudkowsky has remained pretty popular among the San Francisco tech-bro culture he emerged out of. But for our purposes the most interesting detail about MIRI's support is that its funders include Peter Thiel. Thiel is the second-best known of the so-called PayPal Mafia, the initial founders of the now-ubiquitous online payment system who have subsequently become billionaire investors. The best known—Elon Musk—is everybody's favorite cuddly tech billionaire, splashing money on electric cars and human space flight and all that good stuff. Peter Thiel, on the other hand, is a markedly less cuddly one, splashing money in equal parts on tech causes like MIRI and right-wing politics—he spoke at the Republican National Convention in support of Trump, and contributed significantly to his campaign, for which he was predictably rewarded with access. (He's also the guy who bankrolled Hulk Hogan's lawsuit against Gakwer, evidently because he was angry that Gawker had several years earlier made public the well-known fact that he was gay.) But his politics are strange even within the American right wing—libertarian trending into strange terrain, like his oft-quoted declaration, "I no longer believe freedom and democracy are compatible."[9]

But in unpacking the implications of that declaration it's less helpful to look at Thiel, who's ultimately more inclined to throw a couple million dollars at a problem and see what happens than to engage in lengthy philosophical diatribes, than it is to look at another person whose work he's funding, Curtis Yarvin[10]. These days, Yarvin is best known as the founder of Urbit, a startup tech company providing, in its own words, "a secure peer-to-peer network of personal servers, built on a clean-slate system software stack."[11] Or, perhaps

more accurately, he's best known for the astonishing levels of protest that take place whenever a tech conference invites him to speak, generally based on the accusation that he believes in reinstituting slavery and thinks that black people make especially good slaves.[12] The reason for this is relatively simple: he believes in reinstituting slavery and thinks that black people make especially good slaves.[13]

This remarkable claim, along with many others, came during his several-year tenure blogging under the name Mencius Moldbug on his website *Unqualified Reservations*, although it's worth noting that one of the sites where he got his start as a commenter was on *Overcoming Bias*, i.e. where Yudkowsky was writing before *LessWrong*. Moldbug is a long-winded blogger—even his stand-alone posts are quite long, and his major works constitute multiple posts, most notably the fourteen-part *An Open Letter to Open-Minded Progressives*, which we'll get to in a moment. But if one wants to see the basic appeal of Moldbug, one must turn to his considerably shorter *A Gentle Introduction To Unqualified Reservations*, a mere nine-parter (although the ninth part is in three sub-parts, with a fourth having inflated to a book and then seemingly defeated its writer, never to be published).

"New UR readers," he proclaims at the start, "unfortunately, I'm lying. There is no such thing as a gentle introduction to UR. It's like talking about a 'mild DMT trip.' If it was mild, it wasn't DMT." The appeal is obvious: Moldbug is out of his fucking skull. Listen to this shit, after he proclaims that he's going to give readers a *Matrix*-like red pill (not quite the one offered by MRAs, but Moldbug's where they got the term from[14]): "Our genuine red pill is not ready for the mass market. It is the size of a golf ball, though nowhere near so smooth, and halfway down it splits in half and exposes a sodium-metal core, which will sear your throat like a live coal. There will be scarring."[15]

I want to be clear, with all possible sincerity, that I love the braggadocio here. I want what he is selling. Yes, Mencius, savagely tear away the veil of lies with which I cope with the abject horror that is reality and reveal to me the awful, agonizing truth of being. Give me the red pill. The problem is, once we get our golf ball-sized reality distortion pill home, put on some Laibach, and settle in for an epic bout of Thanatosian psychedelia, we discover the unfortunate truth: we're actually just huffing paint in an unhygienic gas station bathroom. Jesus, this isn't even bat country.

Actually, Moldbug's impressively discursive style makes it difficult to identify a moment that one could point to and call "the red pill." There's

nothing like Yudkowsky's primer on Bayes that one looks at and thinks, "OK, that's quite a good explanation," and no iconic argument that serves as a hook. Generally speaking, however, the awful, searing truth with which Moldbug believes we cannot cope is that liberal democracy is pretty shit. Moldbug puts a genuine effort into selling this truth, arguing that there exists a de facto conspiracy of, as he puts it in the *Open Letter*, "mainstream academia, journalism and education"[16] that he calls the Cathedral, as it constitutes a de facto state religion that means that democracy is secretly an Orwellian mind control process. And to be fair, Moldbug really sells it, essentially spinning a vast historical conspiracy theory in which the Roundheads of the English Civil War have secretly controlled the world for centuries via the false rhetoric of classical liberalism and the Enlightenment. But it's hard not to notice that this is basically crap.

By "crap," of course, I do not mean "wrong." Rather, I mean obvious, in the sense of sounding like the guy at the bar watching the news (probably Fox) and muttering about how "they're all a bunch of crooks." Liberal democracy a hopelessly inadequate and doomed system preserved by a system of continual indoctrination? You don't say. Next you'll be telling me about the way the factory farming system that stands between the world and massive famine is slowly killing itself via global warming.

Though actually, and this is where Moldbug becomes interesting, that's not where he goes with it. Instead he wanders back over the past few centuries of history, endlessly dissecting the turn towards liberal democracy and diagnosing its errors, first in terms of the American revolution versus the British monarchy, then (carefully circling around the problem of the Holocaust) suggesting that the same basic process occurred in World War II, explaining that "the 'international community' is a predator" and "reactionaries are its prey," and that the Nazis lost because fascism was an inept attempt at reactionary philosophy[17]. This also leaves a lot to be desired, of course, but it's at least a more interesting sort of failure than the banality of "Democracy's a bit shit, ennit?"

The problem, Moldbug concludes, is one of chaos. Democracy is endlessly compromised by progressivism, which moves it eternally leftwards with its eternal mantra of change. This is chaotic; Moldbug prefers order. Indeed, he values order for its own sake. As he puts it, "The order that the rational reactionary seeks to preserve and/or restore is *arbitrary*. Perhaps it can be justified on some moral basis. But probably not. It is good simply because it is order, and the alternative to order is violence at worst and politics at best."[18]

There are obviously plenty of problems here. Indeed, Moldbug acknowledges them, granting that authoritarian structures are hardly a sure-fire path to non-violence. But, he promises, he's got a really great idea for how to fix it all. And it's this, really, that defines Moldbug in all his mad, idiotic glory. How do you get a non-destructive authoritarian? "The answer: find the world's best CEO, and give him undivided control over budget, policy and personnel." But wait, he's even got a suggestion as to who: "I don't think there is any debate about it. The world's best CEO is Steve Jobs."[19]

This is literally Mencius Moldbug's solution. Hire Steve Jobs to run the world. (Actually just California, but.) Now, it is not as though Moldbug is not aware of the joke here. And yes, more important than the identity of the CEO is the bit about "undivided control." But none of these disclaimers quite erase the striking weirdness of this idea. The problem is, it's not a particularly compelling weirdness. Speaking as someone typing words on a MacBook Air right now in an apartment with eight other Apple devices in it, the idea of a government run by Steve Jobs sounds more or less like the worst thing imaginable, and not just because he's dead. (He wasn't when Moldbug made the suggestion, to be clear.)

Indeed, it's reasonable to ask why on earth Moldbug believes Steve Jobs to be a remotely suitable governmental leader. The answer, coming when Moldbug suggests the terms on which Jobs's governorship should be evaluated, is tremendously revealing: "We can define responsibility in *financial* terms. If we think of California as a *profitable* corporation, a capital asset whose purpose is to maximize its production of cash, we have a definition of responsibility which is not only precise and unambiguous, but indeed quantitative."[20]

With this, we have a genuinely tricky moment, simply because of the sheer and unbridled number of unexamined assumptions going on here. In many ways they form a knot too thick to unpick—you can't just isolate, for instance, the idea that a precise and unambiguous metric for how well the government is performing is a desirable concept in the first place from the bizarre and unspoken sociopathy of a view of government that's utterly unconnected to any motive based on the well-being of its population. But to my mind the most compellingly fucked up thing here is the basic idea that turning a profit is an inherently desirable act.

Actually, this underlies a lot of what's wrong with Moldbug. It's not that I doubt that he has answers to the obvious question of why turning a profit is a good thing; I'm sure he does. Rather, it is that he does not consider this

question obvious enough to bring up and answer alongside his assertion. And this really is stunningly weird in the context of all his red pill rhetoric about the corrupt horrors of liberal democracy. Because while there are a great many obvious critiques of contemporary society, "there's just not enough respect for profit" really doesn't feel like one of them.

This fact exposes a much larger hole within Moldbug's thought. A key tenet of his argument is that the Cathedral is responsible for a steady and eternal leftward drift in post-Enlightenment culture, as evidenced by progress in things like civil rights and feminism. Indeed, it's one of the most-quoted passages of Moldbug, a genuinely well-paced segment of the first part of the *Open Letter* in which he imagines the arc of history—the grand design of Kleio[21] herself—as an aquatic terror worshipped and sustained by the Cathedral, lurking beneath the deep, and suggests analyzing its movements, watching its progress. "Cthulhu may swim slowly," he finally proclaims, "but he only swims left."[22]

Two things are striking here. The first is that Moldbug just rewrote Martin Luther King's "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice" as Lovecraft fanfic. This is without question one of the most brazenly funny moves in the entire history of Western philosophy. The second is that Moldbug does not actually seem to realize that he's made it. Think about it. The Cathedral is a vast and interconnected system of media and academia designed to feed the population a steady diet of blue pills and keep them from figuring out that the world is a lie. And one of its most basic narratives is idea that there has been a steady cultural progress on issues like race and gender over the course of American history. Why, then, does Moldbug uncritically accept it? After all, for all that King's quote is a classic, that narrative is riddled with holes and is based on the systematic erasure of the numerous ways in which various historical periods have actually been more egalitarian than contemporary America. That's not to reject the idea that Kleio's a classical liberal and that there are important ways in which the present is more egalitarian than many previous eras, nor to suggest that the many historical periods that, in point of fact, were significantly more progressive than the present day are in some objective sense "better" because of it. It's just that the idea of American history as a narrative of ongoing progressive victory should be considered at least as dodgy as any other part of the Cathedral's propaganda, and yet Moldbug buys it hook, line, and sinker without even realizing that he's parroting a black man.

But what's really striking is that Moldbug does not even stop to consider why the Cathedral might benefit from this narrative of continual progress. The obvious reason to constantly and unceasingly trumpet your progress in one area, after all, is to distract from your lack of progress in another. And for all the structural inequality that's been removed from American society in terms of race and gender, there's one structural inequality that's never come close to being challenged, namely the divide between the rich and powerful and everybody else. Of course, this isn't a divide that Moldbug (who is after all pro-slavery) is terribly concerned with in the first place, or else he wouldn't be trumpeting profit as the purpose of government. But it's nevertheless a big one.

Indeed, it's one which reveals the fundamental inadequacy of the entire dualism between the monarchic pre-Enlightenment and the democratic post-Enlightenment that Moldbug's historical narrative rests upon. Moldbug trumpets the observation that the American Revolution was not based on serious-minded ideological grievances and grotesque abuses of imperial power as though it's a profound novelty, but the fact that the American Revolution was not really a cool rap musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda but rather a bunch of rich guys consolidating their power has actually been well remarked upon by leftist academics. Indeed, there's actually a significant leftist intellectual tradition that can fairly legitimately claim to be completely suppressed within American culture (particularly American political culture), and that's well-known for observing that revolutions and transitions between ideologies generally come down to people with material power protecting that power.

This is, perhaps, unsurprising. Weirdly, Moldbug is consistently anti-materialist, and indeed is ideologically opposed to historical materialism, largely (though not entirely) allying with the economic theory of the Austrian School, which famously rejects empiricism in favor of a from-first-principles approach based on the idea that humans have free will[23]. His anti-materialism is so complete that at one point he interrogates at length why it might be that the Allied Powers opposed Nazi Germany, without once considering "because they looked at a map of Europe and worked out where Hitler was going to go after Czechoslovakia" as an answer, then concludes that World War II must have been about how reactionary movements are prey to predatory progressive movements. But all the same, if you're going to talk about suppressed ideologies that oppose the interests of entrenched power, you've really got to talk about the original red pill: Marxism.

After all, Marxism, especially in its good old-fashioned "a spectre is haunting Europe" revolutionary sense (which is a much larger body of work than Soviet Communism, and indeed one that contains countless scathing critiques of Leninism and Stalinism) is absolutely one of the positions most completely excluded from the Cathedral, its use in Anglophone politics restricted to a derisive term slung about in the way that "fascist" is applied to Donald Trump, only with less accuracy. Even Bernie Sanders, who aggressively positioned himself for most of his career as a splinter movement to the left of the Democratic party, only ever went so far as to use the term "socialist," a political allegiance that remains in widespread political use in western Europe. When a politician like Jeremy Corbyn, who is at best Marx*ish*, begins to threaten entrenched power he finds literally the entire media apparatus of Great Britain aimed against him, with even the self-professedly progressive *Guardian* mostly sighing mournfully about how he's just too left-wing to ever be taken seriously. (And indeed, one of the things he's routinely attacked for is not being sufficiently supportive of the hereditary monarchy.) Perhaps it's true that "fascist" and "Nazi" remain more politically suicidal self-descriptors, but there's surely no standard by which "Marxist" doesn't round out your top three.

My point is not to suggest that one should construct a Marxist alternative to Moldbug (although I have to admit that does sound a lot more interesting than reading more Moldbug) but rather that it's weird that Moldbug does not, at any point in his staggeringly vast corpus, seriously consider this. His engagement with Marxism consists of some snarky casual dismissals of its supposed incoherence. As an element of history, he treats it as part and parcel of the Cathedral, saying that the Cathedral's "desired end-state was a world order in which the Germans and Japanese were destroyed, the British and French severely weakened (and dependent on the US), and the US and USSR cooperated. That cooperation broke down—temporarily—after 1945, but the Brahmins indefatigably kept pursuing the golden dream of US-Soviet geopolitical cooperation, which eventually became known as 'detente.'"[24] Which I suppose describes the general effort in the 1980s to avoid incinerating the world in a nuclear fireball well enough, though man, as political predictions made in 2008 go, the coming age of US-Soviet geopolitical cooperation has aged… unexpectedly.

And yet at every turn in Moldbug's argument, Marxism seems to lurk—indeed, to haunt—the text. Every argument he makes about the Cathedral's insidious suppression of the obviously preferable alternative has, to a reader

even vaguely with Marx, an immediate counterpart pointing inexorably to the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is tempting to suggest that Moldbug is a failed Marxist in the sense that Jupiter is a failed star, its mass falling tantalizingly short of the tipping point whereby nuclear fusion begins. Over and over again, Moldbug asks questions much like those that Marx asked, and his answers begin with many of the same initial observations. But inevitably, a few steps in, he makes some ridiculously broad generalization or fails to consider some obvious alternative possibility, and the train of thought fizzles into characteristic idiocy.

The most obvious symptom of this is how rarely Moldbug actually takes a swing at Marx himself, despite the fact that he's self-evidently the biggest single villain of his philosophical system. It's not a pattern that's quite noticeable on the paragraph-to-paragraph level; it's just that when you do searches on his blog you discover that in the more than one million words published as Mencius Moldbug he's mentioned Marx a mere one hundred and thirteen times, and that's including his uses of "Marxism" as a generic term of derision. And none of them constitute anything like an extended engagement with Marx's thought. Sure, you can argue that this isn't so much an oversight as a demonstration of contempt, but the fact remains—there's a confrontation that's obviously waiting to happen that Moldbug endlessly deferred. (Hitler, by comparison, makes four hundred and sixty-nine appearances.)

Indeed, at one point late in his blogging career he proclaimed (not for the first time) that he was finally going to offer the red pill in a compact form before dramatically unfurling the statement, "America is a communist country." He even reduces it to an acronym. "*AIACC* can be interpreted in countless ways," he proclaims. "All of these interpretations—unless concocted as an intentional, obviously idiotic strawman—are absolutely true. Sometimes they are obviously true, sometimes surprisingly true. They are always true. Because America is a communist country." And then, as you'd expect, he begins to go through various interpretations to show how they are either obviously idiotic or true. And yet there is one interpretation that, astonishingly, never seems to occur to him: "America is in some meaningful fashion run according to the philosophical principles of Karl Marx." In fact, literally none of the hundred-and-thirteen uses of the word Marx appear in the essay in question, "Technology, communism, and the Brown Scare."[25]

Moldbug posted five more times on *Unqualified Reservations* after that essay, and then retired the pen name. These days, he dissociates from it actively, to the point of penning an essay under the name Curtis Yarvin in which he

proclaims that he is not Mencius Moldbug[26]. Thankfully (or, you know, not), neoreaction did not retire with Moldbug; indeed by the time he proclaimed that America was a communist country the future of the alt-right had already emerged. Which brings us to our third and in many ways strangest figure: Nick Land.

Land does not quite provide our desired Moldbug/Marx punch-up, nor does he provide anything so straightforward as a Moldbuggian commentary on Marx, or a Marxist reading of Moldbug. Instead he does something far weirder: he splits the difference. On the one hand, Land is the other pole of the neoreactionary movement proper (as opposed to the broader Rationalist movement that Yudkowsky represents)—his essay *The Dark Enlightenment* essentially forms a triptych of core works of the movement along with Moldbug's *Open Letter* and *Gentle Introduction*. On the other, he's an ex-academic philosopher steeped in the Marxist tradition. And this isn't anything so simple as a born-again conversion away from the leftist tradition, nor some sort of dull horseshoe theory that reveals the far-left and far-right to be closer to each other than to the political center. No, this one's a deep rabbit hole indeed.

No matter how you slice it, though, *The Dark Enlightenment* is clearly where the trail starts. Its title, after all, immediately became a virtual synonym for the neoreactionary movement at large—it's the name of their main subreddit, for instance. But it's an astonishingly tricky essay, simultaneously addressing the leftist academic circles he used to travel in, to whom it serves as a deliberately scandalous "Dear John" letter, and addressing the already-existent neoreactionary movement. Indeed, for the most part *The Dark Enlightenment* serves as a summary of and commentary upon Moldbug.

This results in a strange and ambiguity-laden tone. Certainly, by and large, Land seems amenable to Moldbug. Consider, for instance, his summary of the Cathedral: "It is necessary to ask, rather, who do capitalists pay for political favors, how much these favors are potentially worth, and how the authority to grant them is distributed. This requires, with a minimum of moral irritation, that the entire social landscape of political bribery ('lobbying') is exactly mapped, and the administrative, legislative, judicial, media, and academic privileges accessed by such bribes are converted into fungible shares… The conclusion of this exercise is the mapping of a ruling entity that is the truly dominant instance of the democratic polity. Moldbug calls it the Cathedral."[27] If anything, Land is prettifying Moldbug, layering in the pragmatic materialism that Moldbug's Austrian School instincts lead him to eschew.

And yet Land never actually comes out and endorses Moldbug in as many words. Indeed, there's a curious detail to Land's prose, in marked contrast with his subject. Where Moldbug's prose is awash with the first person, endlessly taking ownership of his beliefs, Land remains absent from *The Dark Enlightenment*, using the first person only once, in a rhetorical aside during one of his many bouts of hand-wringing around the subject of race. And so an actual statement that Moldbug is correct in his premises and conclusions is simply outside the domain of what the essay can offer in the first place. Certainly Land takes pains to be sympathetic to Moldbug, and he's explicitly positioned *Outside In*, the blog he started in the wake of *The Dark Enlightenment*, within the neoreactionary community. But even there his sympathies are manifestly tactical, an alliance formed for a more esoteric and never quite stated goal—one that he is at times ostentatious about refusing to discuss, a tendency that is in turns beguiling and infuriating.

Indeed, this speaks to a larger ambiguity around Land—something both his old academic audience and his new neoreactionary one debate and speculate upon. Simply put, nobody's quite sure if he's serious. I mentioned earlier how every one of Moldbug's arguments seems to have a secret Marxist double, a fact Moldbug is only dubiously aware of. Land has no such plausible deniability. His entire academic career, spent as part of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, a bunch of '90s cyberpunks loosely affiliated with the University of Warwick, was based around subversive and postmodernist readings of texts in the spirit of writers like Gilles Deleuze. Joining a far-right Internet subculture in an Andy Kaufmanesque piece of philosophical performance art is 100% the sort of thing he'd do. If so, though, it's one played with an unwavering deadpan and nary a wink at the audience. All the same, it's important to understand not only that this ambiguity hangs over his work, but that Land knows it, and knows that you know it, and knows that you know that he knows it, and so on.

But it's also not all unwavering approval of Moldbug, especially once one starts to venture outside of *The Dark Enlightenment* and onto his blog, where Land expresses considerable skepticism towards Moldbug's prescriptions for a post-democratic society. And this points to a larger and more fundamental difference between Moldbug and Land: Moldbug is ultimately a utopian, whereas Land is a philosophical pessimist, and sees Moldbug as a perverse ally. To Land, what is most interesting about Moldbug is the fact he positions all of his calls for a restoration of monarchy within the libertarian tradition, libertarianism being a philosophy genuinely associated with a significant level of individualism. Early in *The Dark Enlightenment* Land makes note of

libertarian icon Friedrich Hayek's insistence that he was an "Old Whig," which is to say, a true heir to the progressive tradition, in contrast with the progressives of his age, who have strayed from the true path, suggesting that "neoreaction" works as a similar formulation.

The point is not, however, to argue that Moldbug is a crypto-liberal. Rather, it is to suggest that liberalism is crypto-neoreactionary—that in the face of the reality of life under the Cathedral the neoreactionary position is the only logical response. Moldbug, in other words, represents the point where western liberalism finally owns up to its true nature. For Land, this is the right of exit, hence the first part of *The Dark Enlightenment* being titled "Neo-reactionaries head for the exit." In his view, what is interesting about Moldbug is that he reduces individual liberty to a right to say "no." This is the idea of negative liberty taken to a brutal teleology—literally nothing more than the right to pick whatever threat comes after the "or you can" portion of a choice.

Once again, this is going to need some context in Land's larger career. In 1997, Land resigned his position at the University of Warwick. He subsequently moved to China, where he began his rightward turn, in part inspired by the degree to which he preferred Shanghai to Warwick. In other words, he is someone who exercised his right to exit, consciously deciding that he preferred a more overtly authoritarian regime to the supposed comforts of a western liberal democracy.

But perhaps more significant is the way in which he did not exercise this right. I will be delicate here, and simply quote his colleague Robin Mackay about the endgame of Land's academic career: "Let's get this out of the way: In any normative, clinical, or social sense of the word, very simply, Land did 'go mad.'"[28] Indeed, Land wrote about the experience in a piece called "A Dirty Joke" in which he talks about himself in a completely dehumanized fashion, calling himself "the ruin" and "it" and using the name "Vauung," which he explains he took "because it was unused, on the basis of an exact qabbalistic entitlement." The piece is genuinely chilling: ""This is a cool radio station,' it said to its sister. 'The radio isn't on,' its sister replied, concerned. Vauung learnt that the ruin's unconscious contained an entire pop industry. The ruin learnt that it had arrived, somewhere on the motorway. Nothing more was said about it. Why upset your family?"

Land positions this break at the endpoint of his philosophical inquiries; indeed, the *Fanged Noumena* collection that contains most of his pre-neoreactionary work ends with "A Dirty Joke," making the teleology explicit. And, significantly, it's a sensible endpoint. Land embraced a position of

intense radicalism, driving himself deliberately to extremes such that it is impossible, reading his work linearly, to quite see where his madness becomes a corruption within it. His subject was always the violent destruction of the self—the idea that civilization was largely fucked, hurtling towards some awful end of its own making. His philosophical quest was always to find that end, and there's a real sense in which his neoreactionary turn is the process of him finding it, at least for himself, and then declining to take it.

There's an obvious echo of the "hit rock bottom and find Jesus" narrative here, and that's perhaps in practice unsurprising given that both Land and Moldbug are consciously trying to open a dialogue with existing right-wing politics, including those associated with an overtly evangelical Christian worldview. For Moldbug this is generally a bit awkward—he can't bring himself not to squawk about his atheism whenever God comes up. One of Land's major contributions to the neoreactionary community, on the other hand, is the construction of a compromise between the largely atheistic technolibertarian crowd Moldbug emerged from and the existing and largely Christian paleo-conservative traditions he increasingly found himself adopted by, an essay called "The Cult of Gnon." Gnon—arrived at after an extended riffing on the phrase "Nature or Nature's God"—is described by Land as "no less than reality, whatever else is believed. Whatever is suspended now, without delay, is Gnon. Whatever cannot be decided yet, even as reality happens, is Gnon. If there is a God, Gnon nicknames him. If not, Gnon designates whatever the 'not' is. Gnon is the Vast Abrupt, and the crossing. Gnon is the Great Propeller."[29]

But Gnon doesn't just bridge a cultural divide within the neoreactionary community—it serves as a crucial bridge within Land's own narrative. He does not talk at great length about his breakdown, and you can hardly blame him for it, but the overwhelming sense he gives is that he did not find God so much as find Gnon—an awful, inescapable realization about the way the world is.

It is here we finally turn to the notion of accelerationism alluded to at the outset, and set opposite the decelerationists we ostensibly don't give a shit about. See, the eschatological search that drove Land mad was not merely a matter of personal curiosity and excessive amphetamine usage, but an explicitly nihilist effort to bring about whatever eschaton necessarily awaited capitalism. This was, for Land, a distinctly different project than, say, the utopian project of Marxism—a project that, unlike Moldbug, Land actually understands. Whatever their critiques of what Land would eventually,

following Moldbug, call the Cathedral, his colleagues retained hope for the existence of some alternative setup that would actually work well. Land believed no such thing existed, and that there was nothing to be done but get it over with as quickly as possible.

Crucially, Land's neoreactionary thought is also accelerationist—or, at least, his opposition to the Cathedral is. "Conceive what is needed to prevent acceleration into techno-commercial Singularity," he writes, "and the Cathedral is what it will be."[30] Which makes sense—the Cathedral, after all, is defined as that which prevents Moldbug's claims from being persuasive (in a pragmatic, rather than ontological sense). If Moldbug is the tendency for liberalism to finally collapse into a singular right of exit, the Cathedral is what constantly promises false alternatives, stalling the inevitable endpoint. And to Land's mind, or at least to the mind of the character Land has been playing for the past several years, if the Cathedral is what's preventing the Singularity and neoreaction wants to smash the Cathedral, he's on team neoreaction.

It's actually not a completely unpersuasive line of thought. Certainly Land is vastly cleverer and more insightful than Yudkowsky or Moldbug, and I'm sure the rather more approving tone I've adopted these past two thousand words has not gone unnoticed by astute readers. And yet in the end the same preposterous and futile arrogance that fuels Yudkowsky and Moldbug is in full effect. Land may be more committed to a materialist view than Moldbug, and he may do better at actually basing his conclusions on the evidence than Yudkowsky, whose literary Bayesianism leads him to equate gut intuition with actual numerical probabilities, but for all that he talks about worshiping at the black altar of undeniable reality, he's still falling for the old philosopher's trap of triumphantly proclaiming that he's got one weird trick to solve everything. Sure, his question is "How do we destroy the world?" instead of "How do we save it?" and that does deserve points for style, but let's face it: the claim that the bunch of racist dingbats that make up the neoreactionary scene are the fastest ticket to capitalist apotheosis is scarcely better than King Jobs. This sort of "the world can be saved if only everyone listens to me" narcissism belongs in the genre of fiction, where it can accomplish something, and not in the visionary manifesto, where it only reveals its own impotence.

II.

"1. Take 3 points in a plane to form a triangle, you need not draw it.
2. Randomly select any point inside the triangle and consider that your current position.
3. Randomly select any one of the 3 vertex points.
4. Move half the distance from your current position to the selected vertex.
5. Plot the current position.
6. Repeat from step 3."—Wikipedia, "Sierpinski triangle"

The outline of the territory sketched, let's map the interior. Clearly there are no shortage of places to start or ground that we really ought to cover. For one, there is still the very large issue of race and neoreaction, which is the most self-evidently awful part of the movement, and which deserves serious treatment instead of the flippancy with which I've thus far treated it. And, for that matter, about gender and neoreaction, which is just as big an issue. There's also the matter of the technofetishism common to Moldbug, Yudkowsky, and Land, that being the only real strand that links them besides being white men from Anglophone countries, as well as being a jumping off point for a number of topics. Plus we've got this strange business of lurking monsters—basilisks, Cthulhus, and shuddering voids of inescapable reality. And there's still the meta-question: how can we respond to the eschaton without the arrogance of thinking that we can change its speed or trajectory?

But let's instead think about the visionary manifesto and its aims. It is a performative genre—one where being interesting is as important as being right, if not slightly more so. That is not to say they can get away with being wrong, at least not straightforwardly so, but it is to reiterate that the key problem with Moldbug, Yudkowsky, and Land is that they are in key regards uninteresting—that they offer dull and unsatisfying answers to their most compelling questions, of which "hang out with a bunch of racist nerdbros" is merely the worst. A key aspect of this is that they are a fundamentally Luciferian genre. The manifesto differs from the plan in that it is oppositional. A plan is what you're going to do—a manifesto is what you're going to ignore to your peril. It shouts from the outside, demanding that key principles of the world be inverted. It is always motivated by the fact that everything you know is wrong.

If we are unsatisfied with these three writers, then, we ought consider what a counter-manifesto might look like. This is in many regards a tricky question. For one thing, as we've already noted, Yudkowsky, Moldbug, and Land do not form any sort of coherent singular position. But then, if what we're opposing is the idea of a singular solution to the general problem of being fucked (and

the assumption that we're fucked does rather preclude one) then we don't need to worry ourselves with the task of coming up with any one statement that serves as a decisive response to all three figures. It is enough to ask simply what an adequate response might be to any of the trains that run among their thoughts.

One obvious model comes from Gilles Deleuze, one of Nick Land's major influences, who said of his own critical work, "I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet at the same time monstrous."[31] This is, ultimately, what Land argues that Moldbug does with the western liberal tradition, reducing the idea of individual liberty down to its purest form, a right to scream back "no" at the world, before finally concluding that we're too chicken to take it. So, with the Land-Moldbug axis being the strongest link we've found so far, let's ask what the monstrous offspring of neoreaction might look like. Or, to use a classical leftist slogan, it's time to fuck fascism.

The trick to this is one of parodic fealty—of taking premises further than their creators do, generally so as to demonstrate why they stopped where they did. This is what Moldbug does with libertarian thought, and the part of his argument that ultimately most resembles Peter Thiel's remarks about democracy. It's also what underlies my suggestion that the idea of the Cathedral undermines the narrative of endless leftward drift and in fact reveals Moldbug to be a mere puppet, with Marxism the true unspeakable alternative. But if we really want a neoreactionary bastard to enthrone we should just return to first principles: the red pill.

The reference, of course, is to *The Matrix*. The first thing to realize is simply the consistency of iconography. This is a movie about the transhumanist singularity dreamed of by Yudkowsky (albeit in a nightmarish, dystopian form), and steeped in the mirrorshaded aesthetic of cyberpunk in which Land did his early work. Neo, the computer programmer turned revolutionary mind-hacker, is self-evidently a fantasy aimed at people like Curtis Yarvin. There is a strain of technofetishism running through all of this so far that exists on a level far deeper than mere axiom.

The second thing to realize is that it's not incidental that the pill's a drug. The red pill reveals "how deep the rabbit hole goes," the *Alice in Wonderland* namecheck being a nod to a larger psychedelic tradition; note the film's earlier invocation in the form of the White Rabbit, a scene that also suggests Neo's alienation from his dreamworld is comparable to mescaline. Moldbug's work is similarly awash with drug references, and Land's is simply awash with the

drugs themselves, his experimentalism having been as amphetamine-fueled as his breakdown. This is clearly a thing, and not entirely unrelated to the technofetishism: consider the cultural drift from Haight-Ashbury to Silicon Valley.[32]

It is an ironic twist, given the cultural politics of psychedelia, that drugs should be a fundamentally authoritarian concept. But there is ultimately no way to avoid the conclusion. It's the entire point of Moldbug's red pill—the idea that the neoreactionary argument is an inevitable process, and that once you take the pill you cannot be unconvinced. Or consider Land's description of the process of being convinced by neoreaction: "The spirit of reaction digs its Sith-tentacles into the brain." (Yes, we're mixing our sci-fi franchises now. Clearly our red pill is more a drug cocktail.) This isn't just a neoreactionary thing either—Land's imagery is only a few doors down from Terence McKenna's suggestion that DMT is an alien intelligence's attempt to communicate directly with the human brain, and we might also point at William S. Burroughs' allegorization of his heroin addiction into his paranoid world of linguistic control machines. This isn't some monstrous offspring of psychedelia; psychedelic horror is a real historical phenomenon, and arguably much larger than the cuddly tie-dye psychedelia of popular culture.

Hell, just look at *The Matrix*, where the red pill trip literally goes through the looking glass, transitioning into the biomechanical body horror of Neo awakening in his pod, tentacular wires violating him and drilling orifices into his skin, his body pumped with nutrient sludge and sedatives. This is the drug's method of action literalized—an alien thing that plugs into our biology and reshapes our consciousness. And it is the very embodiment of the Cathedral—a sustained dream world that is western liberal democracy.

This brings us to the third thing to realize, which is that there are two drugs in Moldbug's (and the Wachowskis') formulation: neoreaction's red pill and the Cathedral's blue. In popular conception, this is a freedom/bondage distinction—the psychedelic liberation of the red pill versus life as a sedated zombie via the blue pill. But we've already seen enough to recognize that the dualism's not that simple. It's more important that they're both drugs, and thus instruments of control, than that one is calling its form of control "freedom." And to its credit, *The Matrix* makes no bones about this. Conspicuously, it is the blue pill that is framed in terms of freedom and awakening ("you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe") and indeed in exit; it's the red pill that's described as a decision to "stay in Wonderland." Indeed, the red pill is an agent of surveillance—once Neo takes it, it's revealed to be "part of a trace

program… designed to disrupt your input/output carrier signal so we can pinpoint your location." Beat that for authoritarian control.

Though if we're counting drugs and not pills we're at three, not two. If drugs are instrument of external control then the Matrix surely counts: it's an induced perception of reality, after all. Indeed, that's basically how it's presented to us when Neo wakes up, what with all those tubes pumping things into him. And while it might be tempting to simply equate the blue pill with the Matrix, they're clearly distinct—the blue pill is not what generates the perception of the Matrix, and comes from a completely different source—the Resistance—than the Matrix's creators.

One consequence of this realization is that the Cathedral ought be considered a drug too, although that's going to require some serious unpacking, so let's set it aside for now. Of more immediate concern is the nature of the blue pill. Not, obviously, in the movie, where one assumes it's just a basic sedative, but in the larger sense of Moldbug's thought. When he first boasts of his red pill concept, he says, "We've all seen The Matrix. We know about red pills. Many claim to sell them. You can go, for example, to any bookstore, and ask the guy behind the counter for some Noam Chomsky. What you'll get is blue pills soaked in Red #3."[33] In contrast with these "many" dyed blue pills, his red pill is one of a kind, raw and unfinished, with its famous sodium-metal core.

This is the key difference between the two pills: the red pill only needs to be taken once, whereas the blue pill must be taken again and again. This is true, at least implicitly, within the film. The blue pill is waking up inside the Matrix and being "free" to assess your drug-addled perceptions and come to a conclusion about the nature of the world. This happens roughly every morning; indeed, by the time Neo's tripping balls and covered in mirror he's already done this three times in the film. Again, it's important to contrast the blue pill and the Matrix itself. The blue pill is taken repeatedly, whereas the Matrix is administered *continuously*; it is not "many" but "all."

It would, of course, be terribly bitchy to point out that Mencius Moldbug's verbose and multi-part blogging style is rather more resembling of the blue pill's method of administration than the red pill's. But then again, the fact that Moldbug hasn't got the goods was basically the first thing we noticed about him. Still, it's an important thing to realize: nothing about Moldbug's supposed red pill distinguishes it from Chomsky's. And I don't just mean Moldbug's verbosity, nor even the basic structure of Moldbug's blog, which he cops to, quite reasonably pointing out that this is how blogs work. Rather it is the

larger neoreactionary discourse—the myriad of blogs, subreddits, and Twitters that exist to endlessly spit out neoreactionary memes, evangelizing over and over again, generally to each other, but with especial vigor whenever they find anyone who expresses the slightest skepticism about the red pill's effects. The tone of these engagements is brilliantly satirized by David Malki's famed "The Terrible Sea Lion" comic, in which two women remark on how much they dislike sea lions only to be chased around by one for two days repeatedly demanding that they provide sources to back up their assertions[34]. This constant restatement of an idea defined by the fact that it only needs to be expressed evokes Eve Sedgwick's observation of the conspiracy theorist's obsession with telling and retelling the story of their preferred conspiracy, as though they believe that if only their testimony is understood by the right person everything will be OK[35]. ("Come on, Steve. Do you want to sell scraps of aluminum for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?" one imagines Moldbug pleading.[36])

Moldbug, to his credit, is aware of this tendency, and offers an explanation. After a suitably florid build to the idea that the American government is an Orwellian mind control state, defined as one that is "existentially dependent on systematic public deception," he describes a red pill as "any stimulus or stimulant, pharmaceutical or literary, that fundamentally compromises said system of deception. That sounds very medical, but let's be clear: you are not taking our pill as a public service. At least with our present crude packaging, the remedy is not accessible to any politically significant percentage of citizens. Rather, you are dosing up because you'd rather be high. Despite the agony of ingestion, it's just too much fun to see your old reality from the outside. This, rather than 'society,' is why you will return to UR again and again."[37] Tellingly, though, the "fun" of the red pill is based in part on its exclusivity. What's fun is seeing reality from the outside—in other words, watching all those silly little people who aren't clever enough to understand the red pill. Which is a fairly large problem: for the red pill to work, it requires that the neoreactionary have a ready supply of deluded people. In other words, neoreaction's sense of legitimacy is existentially dependent on systematic public deception.

As damning as this sounds, it's not actually that useful as an attack on neoreaction. The problem is that neoreaction basically already knows this and is OK with it. That's the whole point of the right to exit—a final and decisive rescue of individual liberty at all costs. But exiting requires that people stay behind; if we all go, we'll just have to storm out again. The entire point of the

project is to separate the wheat from the chaff. Most people, under Moldbug, are likely to be slaves anyway. All the same, the point remains: Steve Jobs isn't going to be dismantling the Cathedral any more than he dismantled Grand Central Station or Covent Garden when he put Apple stores in.

No, what's really striking is Moldbug's repeated insistence on the "agony of ingestion." While a fair description of his writing style, it's rather hard to see what he actually intends it to refer to in terms of neoreaction. And this is clearly a definitional thing about the red pill. It doesn't just offer the truth; it offers the searing and traumatic truth. That's the entire point of Joe Pantoliano's character in *The Matrix*, who, having taken the red pill, has decided that the Matrix was his preferred drug after all, a position that is not so much refuted as set aside when its sole proponent is impaled. And Moldbug is visibly desperate to believe he's got it, despite the almost painful lack of agony.

But look, Moldbug isn't insincere. If he says the red pill is agonizing to swallow, we can safely assume that he, at least, is agonized. So the question becomes what, precisely Moldbug finds agonizing in his own thought. Which is closely related to the question of what his monstrous offspring looks like. What's the moment in his reasoning that he doesn't want to be there? He says that it's Part 9a of the *Gentle Introduction*, which begins, after several parts not mentioning anything like the red pill at all, "Today you begin your irreversible descent into black, unthinkable madness." Oh boy! But let's continue with our "Moldbug is sincere" principle and assume that, after his eight-part build-up, he really is delivering what he imagines to be the goods. Certainly Part 9a marks a turning point, as he explains it, between the first eight parts that explain "what history really is, and what it really has to teach us," and the finale that offers a program of action.

So what is the program of action? It's not, to be clear, putting Steve Jobs in charge; that's Moldbug's wish, but he isn't actually proposing it as a plan of action. Actually, Moldbug is being refreshingly realistic here, trying to come up with a program that can be enacted on an individual level. As he conceptualizes it, the idea is to be "political engineers" designing a backup system that will kick in when American democracy inevitably goes south. And the first step of this backup system is, as he puts it, becoming worthy, by which he means the embrace of a doctrine he calls passivism. He describes it thusly: "The steel rule of passivism is absolute renunciation of official power. We note instantly that any form of resistance to sovereignty, so long as it

succeeds, is a share in power itself. Thus, absolute renunciation of power over USG[38] implies absolute submission to the Structure."

And suddenly the abyss gazes also. Moldbug has stared into the truth of history, seen that it is a massive pack of lies designed purely to justify the corrupt status quo, and the only thing he can think to do about it is to submit entirely to the status quo. Make no mistake—he wants to burn it all down. He says, flatly, that he considers American democracy to be morally comparable to Nazi Germany, declaring that they are "both criminal regimes which history will rejoice to see abolished, because I feel that Washington can no less escape the crimes of Moscow than the Wehrmacht can escape the crimes of the SS."[39] (We'll just leave be the idea that the crimes of Moscow are the worst of Washington's sins.) He wants desperately to be a revolutionary, but because he wants to rebel against the entire process of historical progress he has to forswear "demonstrations, press releases, suicide bombs, lawsuits, dirty bombs, Facebook campaigns, clean bombs, mimeographed leaflets, robbing banks, interning at non-profits, assassination, 'tea parties,' journalism, bribery, grant writing, graffiti, crypto-anarchism, balaclavas, lynching, campaign contributions, revolutionary cells, new political parties, old political parties, flash mobs, botnets, sit-ins, direct mail, monkeywrenching, and any other activist technique, violent or harmless, legal or illegal, fashionable or despicable."[40] He abandons the term "citizen" in favor of "subject," accepting the irrevocable yoke of slavery. No wonder he's in terrified agony.

This is pretty much the exact moment that connects Moldbug to Land. And in some ways Land's version of it is the more persuasive, even as it's the less accessible. Moldbug got here by having too much time on his hands and self-educating on American history entirely via primary source documents while stoned. Land, on the other hand, had a complete fucking breakdown. If someone took the proper red pill, it was Land, who clearly stared into some conceptual heart of darkness and was transformed by the strange and alien light within. But either way, we've been through this patch before—what's key about the neoreactionary right to exit is that once again we realize at the last moment that we are too scared to take it.

Land has actually written about horror at some length: *Outside in* contains links two series of blog posts on its header, one called *Neoreaction*, the other *Abstract Horror*. This latter essay is also reprinted in his book *Phyl-Undhu*, the main content of which is a philosophical horror novella of that name. The story opens in Lovecraft pastiche—"Utter nullity. In the words of the ancient sages of ruined Ashenzohn, it was *the endlessness that ends in itself*. Dark silence

beyond sleep and time, from whose oceanic immensities some bedraggled speck of attention—pulled out, and turned—still dazed at the precipitous lip, catches a glimmer, as if of some cryptic emergence from eclipse. Then a sound, crushed, stifled, broken into gasps. Something trying to scream…"—and then transitions into a woman, Alison, waking up from a nightmare. Her first thought borders on an authorial self-insert: "madness is no escape." For my part, I should disclaim that I had already gotten to this part of the first draft of the book, its first line long since in place, when I came upon the moment in *Phyl-Undhu* when a character, beginning a description of some philosophical argument that is an evident source of deep horror and disturbance for those who have contemplated it, says "everything starts from the end." I will not lie and say that I did not find this moment genuinely unsettling, which is of course the point of a work of philosophy that is about horror, and moreover a horror story that is about philosophy.

Philosophical horror—which Land has said he considers to be where he does his main work these days—is a genre that's been rigorously theorized by Eugene Thacker, an American philosopher a generation younger than Land, but working in many of the same traditions. Thacker, to be clear, is in no way a neoreactionist, and I suspect he would unhesitatingly and unambiguously repudiate the label and the bulk of the thought, if only on the principle that this is the null hypothesis when it comes to neoreaction. Nor is there direct influence between Thacker and Land, although each is aware of the other (Thacker has mentioned Land in an interview, and I just went ahead and asked Land on Twitter because this paragraph looked weird without that symmetry). But they have many of the same influences and subjects—Land's major academic work of philosophy, for instance, was a monograph on Georges Bataille, who is also a major subject of Thacker's. To use a phrase from *Phyl-Undhu*, they share an Outside.

Thacker's relevant work, the three-volume *Horror of Philosophy* series, begins with the familiar eschatological litany: "The world is increasingly unthinkable—a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction." He posits that in this situation the "absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all" becomes increasingly relevant, and observes that this is a frequent theme of both philosophy and horror.[41] Indeed, Thacker argues that any work of philosophy can be read as a horror story, and vice versa, a claim he demonstrates in the latter two volumes of the set.

Thacker proceeds to use these connections to form a vocabulary of symbols and metaphors for talking about the present condition. An early section, for instance, analyzes the connotations of the word "black" in the genre of "black metal" at length, carefully parsing the notion of a forbidden, transgressive darkness between its Luciferian and pagan variations, then constructing a third he calls "Cosmic Pessimism," framed in terms of Schopenhauer and Lovecraft, then repeats the analysis with ideas like demons and magic circles, constructing a rich and suggestive language of horror tropes to talk about the concept of the world-without-us—the world in which humanity is absent. Thacker uses the word Planet for this, in contrast to the Kantian idea of the experienced World, to describe the weird and vast blackness of space and the infinitesimal scale of our particular rock and the fireplace it falls endlessly around.

Land invokes a similar notion in "Exterminator," which joins "Abstract Horror" in making up the backmatter of *Phyl-Undhu*. His term is the Great Filter, an idea he borrows from Robin Hanson, a libertarian economist who created the blog *Overcoming Bias* on which Yudkowsky got his start. Hanson, for his part, coined it in 1998 as part of an explanation for the Fermi Paradox.[42] This paradox addresses the disjunction between our science fiction of interplanetary civilization and the observable evidence of an endless lifeless void surrounding us (despite extrasolar planets pretty much everywhere we look), and asks why this might be. It should be noted, this is not a particularly hard question to come up with good answers for. There are a preposterously large number of unknowns in it: the probability of civilized life evolving on a given habitable planet, the technological feasibility of interstellar travel, and the degree to which our ability to imagine alien life actually reflects the potential diversity of the phenomenon and thus whether we would recognize intelligent life if we saw it are merely the biggest of the known unknowns. Ultimately, all we know about the problem is simply that there doesn't seem to be anybody else out there.

Hanson, however, reframes the question in a more pressingly binary form. One way or another, there's something that keeps interstellar civilizations as we imagine them from being common. As Hanson puts it in the abstract of his paper, "Humanity seems to have a bright future, i.e., a non-trivial chance of expanding to fill the universe with lasting life. But the fact that space near us seems dead now tells us that any given piece of dead matter faces an astronomically low chance of begating [sic] such a future. There thus exists a great filter between death and expanding lasting life, and humanity faces the

ominous question: how far along this filter are we?" Or, to put it as he does in his chilling title, "The Great Filter—Are We Almost Past It?"

Land reconceptualizes the matter as "an absolute threat" that faces technologically adept civilizations. As he puts it, "The Great Filter does not merely hunt and harm, it exterminates… whatever this utter ruin is, it happens every single time. The mute scream from the stars says that nothing has ever escaped it. Its kill-performance is flawless. Tech-Civilization death sentence with probability ~1."[43] Like I said, let's assume that we're fucked.

Land also makes an argument along the same lines as Thacker in "Abstract Horror," which begins, "When conceived rigorously as a literary and cinematic craft, horror is indistinguishable from a singular task: *to make an object of the unknown, as the unknown*." He subsequently frames it in terms that almost perfectly match Thacker's: "Horror first encounters 'that' which philosophy eventually seeks to know."[44] What is key about horror is its sense of mutation and monstrosity, a tendency he roots in Lovecraft's declaration that he chose to write "weird stories because they suit my inclination best—one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis."[45] Lovecraft's sense of the Weird led him to assume a universe that was malevolently indifferent to humanity, populated by unfathomable horrors knowable only by analogies as bleak as they are oblique. Land's argument, in effect, is that the silent cosmos is exactly that—an unmistakable message that there is something wrong with us simply by virtue of our being a civilization.

But if we're going to talk about philosophy transmuting into a horror story, we've got a better example: Roko's Basilisk. Indeed, *Phyl-Undhu* makes a few cracks about this: Alison, the initial viewpoint character of the story, is a psychologist and cult deprogrammer dealing with an exile from a group of technofetishists that's blatantly modeled on Roko's falling out with the *LessWrong* community. (It is hardly the only such allegory in the story—later, a character named Alex Scott expresses an argument about the Great Filter originally formulated by former *LessWrong* blogger Scott Alexander.[46]) And no wonder: it really is a spectacular story.

Unfortunately, the Basilisk is also a story that's very difficult to frame in terms that make a lot of sense outside the bubble of Yudkowskian thought; the steps of the argument are, to an outside observer, all faintly ridiculous,

their result more a silly thought experiment than a serious issue. What is important to remember, however, is that Yudkowsky's thought is in practice organized around his desire to achieve immortality by being reincarnated by a super-intelligent AI. Most of the steps along the path to Roko's Basilisk, idiosyncratic as they are, make at least some sort of sense when considered as premises adopted for that purpose.

The first and most straightforward weird premise is one that Yudkowsky establishes through some intense contortions of the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, which is a belief that one ought treat any copies of one's self that exist in any possible future timelines not only as real, but as really being one's self to the extent that one should actually care what happens to them. The means by which Yudkowsky reaches this are obscure; he explicitly cites it as one of those things that won't make sense to the unenlightened masses.[47] But the appeal of the conclusion is obvious: it allows the utopian vision to apply directly to the present day in spite of the profound and potentially insoluble technological barriers between us and strong AI.[48]

The second and more bewildering premise is actually something of a locus of related premises, all of them having to do with the idea of perfectly predicting someone or something's behavior. This is a notoriously tricky premise to introduce into rational analysis, leading to all sorts of oddities like Newcomb's Paradox, a thought experiment similar to the Prisoner's Dilemma that's of mild but significant interest within analytical philosophy, but that Yudkowsky is weirdly obsessed with. One of these oddities, Yudkowsky suggests, is the idea of "acausal trade," which claims that it is meaningfully possible to negotiate with a future superintelligent AI if it can predict your actions and you can predict its.[49] The latter of these may seem deeply improbable given that a superintelligent AI is by definition a profoundly alien being that does not think like humans, but remember that we only got here because of a ridiculously inflated sense of our own rationality. Indeed, the former of these may seem vastly improbable if you are inclined to believe that humans are not in fact predictable in any absolute sense, which may actually be the more substantial objection. But for better or for worse (well, for worse, as Roko is about to demonstrate) Yudkowskians believe both fervently, which again makes sense from an external perspective in that it allows them a form of communion with their desired futuristic AI. Or, as Land put it when parodying them in *Phyl-Undhu*, "The End is a Thing, and an Intelligence… and we can converse with it."

The awful interaction of these two premises comes when Roko imagines "the ominous possibility that if a positive singularity does occur, the resultant singleton may have precommitted to punish all potential donors who knew about existential risks but who didn't give 100% of their disposable incomes to x-risk motivation."[50] The logic here is that a friendly AI that wants to save humanity from itself would want to make sure it comes into being, and so would try to ensure this by threatening to take anyone who imagined its existence and then failed to bring it about and torture a simulation of them for all eternity, which, due to the Yudkowskian interpretation of the many-worlds hypothesis, is equivalent to torturing the actual person. And so upon thinking of this AI you are immediately compelled to donate all of your income to trying to bring it about.

This is genuinely funny, but it's important to stress that it was also *genuinely terrifying* for some people. Indeed, even Yudkowsky was visibly rattled by it, furiously replying to Roko's post suggesting this idea by saying, "Listen to me very closely, you idiot. YOU DO NOT THINK IN SUFFICIENT DETAIL ABOUT SUPERINTELLIGENCES CONSIDERING WHETHER OR NOT TO BLACKMAIL YOU. THAT IS THE ONLY POSSIBLE THING WHICH GIVES THEM A MOTIVE TO FOLLOW THROUGH ON THE BLACKMAIL,"[51] a passage Land memorably refers to as "among the most gloriously *gone* texts of modern times."[52] And Roko, to be clear, understood the degree to which this was a genuinely dangerous train of thought, noting in his post that "one person at SIAI[53] was severely worried by this, to the point of having terrible nightmares." It was, in other words, a concrete demonstration of Thacker's point—a philosophy that realized its own horror story and freaked the fuck out at it. Indeed, Roko himself was deeply upset by his own train of thought and left the *LessWrong* community, subsequently declaring that he wished he "had never learned about any of these ideas" or "come across the initial link on the internet that caused me to think about transhumanism and thereby about the singularity,"[54] a statement that Land uses almost exactly in *Phyl-Undhu* when Alison says of her technocultist patient that "he wants to have not thought certain things."

It's an awful, snarled contradiction, a desire whose recognition frustrates itself. It's familiar to Land as well, of course. To most people, I suspect. The awful, dawning realization that we're fucked: that civilization faces a terminal decline, and that the human project is pure folly. Which is, of course, just the point he makes about the Great Filter/Exterminator. But in *Phyl-Undhu* Land

offers a slightly different take. "Exterminator" ultimately suggests that this horror be conceived of in abstract terms: "It is the highly probable fact that we have yet to identify the greatest hazards, and this threat unawareness is a structural condition, rather than a contingent deficiency of attention." Or, as he puts it more succinctly, "Unknown unknowns cosmically predominate." We don't understand what's wrong. *Phyl-Undhu*, on the other hand, is ultimately all too clear, offering a more or less materialist account of the inevitability of social collapse. Where "Exterminator" points to an unknowable world, *Phyl-Undhu* suggests an altogether too obvious world based on the most banal of historical observations: every civilization faces a decline and fall, and every species goes extinct.

But crucially, this is not a new realization for Land, which is to say, it was not something that he came to understand while going mad. He was making claims like "capital is a social suicide machine" a quarter-century ago.[55] The realization that the endgame of the societal project is death is not a new one for him. Which is to say that he's being cheeky in *Phyl-Undhu*, selling philosophical pessimism to a readership that thinks it's edgier and more shocking than it is. And fair play to him, it is the most convincing bit of red dye on display among the neoreactionaries.

But let's turn back to Moldbug, simply because we haven't done the whole "horror" thing with him yet, nor even produced a decent monstrous offspring. Thacker describes the process of horror-philosophy as arising from the way in which philosophers grapple with doubt, saying that "every philosopher negates something in the world or about the world—a presumption, an article of faith, what passes as common sense. But this negation always paves the way for a further affirmation, a claim about how things really are." Certainly Moldbug adheres to this description, endlessly negating the common sense of Enlightenment liberalism. But the turn towards horror comes with "the possibility of a 'no' that never leads to a 'yes,' a 'no' that must, as a consequence, devolve upon and devour itself, leading to paradox and contradiction."[56]

For Moldbug it's clear that the swerve away from negation comes at the point where he forswears all activism in favor of a doctrine of passivism, which he describes saying, "The passivist does not rebel against USG, because he has not the right to do so; he has not the right to do so, because he has not the power to do so."[57] And with that, for all his protestations about the horrors of western democracy and USG, he accepts his slavery. Yes, he subsequently forms his "plan B" that will step in when western liberalism

collapses under its own contradictions, but at that point it's literally "meet the new boss, same as the old boss." The point where his "no" becomes a "yes" is ultimately the belief that power is inherently legitimate.

What, then, if he said no again? To be fair to him, there are moments where he just about contemplates this possibility, although in an almost deliberately facile way that prevents him from having to take it seriously. For instance, in his blog post "A formalist manifesto" he declares that "you're bound by a rule if, and only if, you agree to it. We don't have rules that are made by the gods somewhere. What we have is actually not rules at all, but agreements." And he follows this to a logical endpoint, saying that "if you're a wild man and you agree to nothing—not even that you won't just kill people randomly on the street—this is fine. Go and live in the jungle, or something. Don't expect anyone to let you walk around on their street, any more than they would tolerate, say, a polar bear."[58] But the gaps in this are numerous. The most obvious gap is in Moldbug's rather limited conception of the wild man. The real danger is not a man who refuses to stop killing people randomly in the street, a problem that might prove challenging to excessively purist philosophical doctrines, but which societies in practice are pretty good at dealing with. No, the real danger is a man who refuses to *commit* to not killing people, but who is not presently actually doing so. Or, more broadly, the man whose agreement exists at an oblique angle to society; something more compatible with it than a polar bear, but less than Moldbug's submission to the powers that be.

Indeed, one can push this line of thought further and arrive at a position not entirely unlike Roko's Basilisk for Moldbug, in that it involves constructing an unpleasant but plausible sort of authority. If power is as power does then any force that can successfully imitate power is a legitimate power. Which brings us neatly to what happens if we look at passivism and offer another "no." This does not, of course, mean embracing any traditional sense of activism; that's a decelerationist's approach. But it does mean skipping straight to the end and simply taking over the world.

The tactics one uses don't really matter. One approach that Moldbug is perpetually afraid to acknowledge is of course religious. Moldbug makes a great show of showing the American government to be a religion in the form of the Cathedral, but once he's done so he discards the traditional manifestation, save for when he says things like, "we don't have rules that are made by the gods somewhere,"[59] which may be true in terms of absolute metaphysics, but is obviously false in terms of material politics. The truth is

that the guy who says that he knows what God wants is never a bad bet in terms of who's going to be running things. But there's a second, blunter approach that perhaps more accurately captures the Basilisk's stony gaze, which is that in a worldview where legitimate power is defined as power that is successfully applied, there's no legitimate authority quite like the men with guns who kick down your door in the middle of the night. Moldbug repeatedly reiterates that he abhors such violence, but for all Moldbug imagines a system that ascends to power because of its own self-evident perfection, the reality is that his system is profoundly vulnerable to the phenomenon of people declaring themselves to be in charge and offering unpalatable but undeniably compelling terms.

Which brings us to Hitler. As Land observes in *The Dark Enlightenment*, "Hitler perfectly personifies demonic monstrosity, transcending history and politics to attain the stature of a metaphysical absolute: evil incarnate. Beyond Hitler it is impossible to go, or think." Moldbug, for his part, ties himself in knots to come to the conclusion that yes, sure, the Nazis were reactionaries, but they were rubbish at it and too influenced by democracy. But in many ways this undersells the true conceptual horror of Nazi Germany, which is not merely, as Moldbug suggests, its human rights record, but the fact that Hitler was *a complete fucking nutcase*. The dirty little secret about *Mein Kampf* is that it's relentlessly and mind-wrenchingly awful in a way that makes Moldbug look like a towering literary and intellectual genius. And he was one of the more put together Nazis; people like Goebbels and Himmler were deranged incompetents of the highest order.

And yet Hitler did quite well. The whole Nazi team did, really. I mean, yes, sure, they were vanquished and turned into a signifier for the absolute endpoint of human moral depravity, which is a pretty emphatic defeat as such things go, but when you think about how mind-bendingly inept they were it starts to seem more impressive that they got that far in the first place. The implications of this are profound, if only to the degree which they mark a sobering reminder of how perverse a Muse Kleio can be. But they also pose a significant problem for any political philosophy: how do you deal with the fact that history can fuck up that hard?

It is not, obviously, that Moldbug does not have answers to that question. Quite the contrary, it's the question that most obsesses him; he just happens to take the Founding Fathers as his fuckups of choice. But I bring this up because the unfortunate reality is that the people who flocked to Moldbug and Land are exactly the sort of morons Hitler makes you worry about. Or, to put it more bluntly, neoreactionaries are vicious little shits. Let's just illustrate that

in the rawest practical terms by pulling up /r/darkenlightenment, the neoreactionary subreddit named after Nick Land's essay, and seeing what the movement was interested in on the evening in late 2015 when I wrote this. At the top of the page, a piece about the November 2015 Paris attacks, titled "More Paris Attacks: Preparing Ourselves for Liberal Apologetics for Muslim Crimes," that talks about how Muslims and black people are just inherently more violent than other people and can't possibly integrate. Below the fold, an anti-immigration piece from the *Telegraph,* a piece bemoaning how white people at the University of Missouri are afraid of being called racists, a piece called "Increasing Diversity => Fascism," and a piece about how women, homosexuals, and the working class are "false tribes" in contrast to real tribes like race and nationality. Further down, pieces about "show trials" to enforce Title IX and a piece about how more young American women are living with their families than before, with comments debating whether this is proof of how many immigrants there are in America or because "women's liberation" (scare quotes from the comment) has been bad for women. Elsewhere, skepticism about global warming.

Charming sorts, clearly. And that's the intellectual wing of the alt-right—if we went to r/The_Donald things would be even worse. But the vicious little shit qualities of your garden variety neoreactionary are very much part of the point, at least for Nick Land. In part 4d of *The Dark Enlightenment* he constructs an extended metaphor around the word "cracker" in its sense as "a slur targeting poor southern whites of predominantly Celtic ancestry," describing them as "grit in the clockwork of progress," and as Qabbalistic forces of "schism or secession" based on the power of cracks "to widen, deepen, and spread." His meaning is clear: racist hicks are awesome forces of abstract horror. He tacitly reiterates this in *Phyl-Undhu*, which notes, in a variety of ways, that strong tribal affiliations and hostility to outsiders is likely the soundest survival tactic in most practical eschatons.

He may well be right in this, although one gets the sense that he's rather glad not to be a part of that American culture; elsewhere in the labyrinthine Part 4 of *The Dark Enlightenment* he remarks fondly about how "there is no part of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai, or very many other East Asian cities where it is impossible to wander, safely, late at night. Women, whether young or old, on their own or with small children, can be comfortably oblivious to the details of space and time, at least insofar as the threat of assault is concerned." Meanwhile, when speaking of the folks he's nominally fascinated by these days he says, "Since stereotypes generally have high statistical truth-value, it's more than possible that crackers are clustered heavily

on the left of the white IQ bell-curve, concentrated there by generations of dysgenic pressure." Indeed, it's tough to seriously argue that Land's sense of horror at crackers doesn't have the same relationship to garden variety intellectual snobbery that Moldbug's insistence that making a good slave isn't a bad thing has with racism.

Instead, it always seems as though he views the bulk of neoreactionaries as a sort of Petri dish in which he can observe the spasming collapse of the technosingularity. Perhaps they are a suitable microcosm. But in this regard, at least, Moldbug has a point. In the "Gentle Introduction," he praises the 18th century loyalist Massachusetts judge Peter Oliver, essentially suggesting that reactionaries like him are better than revolutionaries like John Adams because Oliver "is a man you could have a beer with." And he notes, "You can't actually have a beer with Peter Oliver, but you can read his book."[60] The truth is that, despite Land's evident fascination with them, the bulk of neoreactionaries are not people one would want to have a beer with, and there's not a great case for reading their books either.

But if I might be so bold as to suggest, there are other ways of saying "no" at this point in the argument that don't require hanging out with banal edgelords who get off trying to see how close to saying "Hitler was right" you can actually get without losing the ability to semi-credibly (at least to other reactionaries) say "but I'm not a Nazi or anything" afterwards. Indeed, when it comes to recasting philosophy as horror it is safe to say that the sort of immediate lurch to the most dramatic form of negation to hand is in most regards the least interesting—a point Moldbug is consistently deficient on. The obvious truth of horror philosophy is that there's an aesthetic; one based on a tightrope balance between the initial "yes" that one is fleeing from and the eventual "yes" that interrupts the series of "nos." Tzvetan Todorov, in theorizing the genre of the Fantastic, describes a specific iteration: an extended ambiguity between the possibility that the protagonist is mad and the possibility of the supernatural.[61] The story balances between the horrors of madness and the Other, drawing out the act of settling on one of the two available "yeses." But the specific chasms on either side are in the end less important than the awful and sustained gravity of them. That's the point of the horror story. And by just taking as hard a negation as possible, which is what the bulk of actual neoreaction amounts to, one largely fails at this aesthetic.

III.

"The earth is a bitch, we've finished our news. Homo Sapiens have outgrown their use. All the strangers came today, and it looks as though they're here to stay."—David Bowie, "Oh You Pretty Things!"

Let's return to the Basilisk, shall we? After all, it meets Todorov's definition perfectly. The person tormented by it is either in the thrall of a force reaching back through time or suffering from a fundamental error of reasoning. The former is clearly supernatural, the latter madness. More than that, however, Yudkowsky's explicit valuation of "rationality" firmly allies him with the essential qualities of a protagonist in a Todorov-style Fantastic tale. The fundamental horror of the "supernatural vs. madness" tension is that both represent the failure of reason, madness in the form of its disintegration, the supernatural in the form of its inadequacy. That neither would happen was always the fundamental promise of Yudkowsky's system: Bayes' theorem was supposed to save us from error and the unknown. And so the intrusion of the Fantastic in the form of Roko's Basilisk represents an unusually poignant threat.

But in looking at Yudkowsky this way a different sort of concern becomes clear, one that helps to clarify the connection between him and Moldbug. When read in terms of Todorov, it becomes clear that Yudkowsky is attempting to escape a form of irrationality. In some ways this is obvious: his two main blogging projects, after all, were called *Overcoming Bias* and *LessWrong*. He has always positioned himself as a vanquisher of error. But unlike Moldbug, who is very explicit about the error he seeks to vanquish, Yudkowsky is nominally more vague. His major works tend to start with the human bias towards optimism, which is a fair enough target; as I said, let us assume that we are fucked. But this is only a starting point, and he obviously goes much further. Indeed, in a very fundamental sense it is simply error itself he is afraid of, in much the same way that Land is afraid of the radically unknown.

But there's another angle that must be considered. Just as we approached the premises of Roko's Basilisk with an eye towards understanding what purpose they served, let us approach the question of what sort of error Yudkowsky is fleeing from a pragmatic standpoint. As with most things regarding Yudkowsky, it is worth recalling that he is an autodidact who was manifestly ill-suited to the American education system. I will admit that I was merely the bright kid who annoyed his teachers a fair amount, but I can still speak with some authority and say that the overwhelmingly characteristic

experience of this state of affairs is the experience of being furiously, impotently aware that someone with power over you is massively and fundamentally *wrong* about something.

Indeed, Yudkowsky writes a compelling account of this experience in *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality*, one of the more blatant moments of using Harry as an authorial mouthpiece. At one point, Professor McGonagall expresses concern based on the way Harry acts that he might have been abused, which Harry angrily refutes, offering the following alternative explanation for why he is the way he is:

> "I'm too smart, Professor. I've got nothing to say to normal children. Adults don't respect me enough to really talk to me. And frankly, even if they did, they wouldn't sound as smart as Richard Feynman, so I might as well read something Richard Feynman wrote instead. I'm isolated, Professor McGonagall. I've been isolated my whole life. Maybe that has some of the same effects as being locked in a cellar. And I'm too intelligent to look up to my parents the way that children are designed to do. My parents love me, but they don't feel obliged to respond to reason, and sometimes I feel like they're the children—children who won't listen and have absolute authority over my whole existence. I try not to be too bitter about it, but I also try to be honest with myself, so, yes, I'm bitter. And I also have an anger management problem, but I'm working on it. That's all."[62]

Yes, it's clear that Yudkowsky is, at times, one of the most singularly punchable people in the entire history of the species, and to be fair, *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* is unequivocal about the fact that Harry is. But there's something genuinely moving about this passage, and moreover, that "something" is a fundamental part of Yudkowsky's appeal. Indeed, it's in some ways the most basic similarity between him and Moldbug: they are both animated by an entirely sympathetic anger that people with power are making obvious and elementary errors. But what's really important is how this sheds light on what exactly Yudkowsky is fleeing from, and in turn on why the Basilisk is the monster lurking at the heart of his intellectual labyrinth. Yudkowsky isn't just running from error; he's running from the idea of authority. The real horror of the Basilisk is that the AI at the end of the universe is just another third grade teacher who doesn't care if you understand the material, just if you apply the rote method being taught.

As many have noted, Roko's Basilisk shares numerous structural similarities to the 17th century argument Pascal's Wager, which is generally described as an argument for why you should believe in God, but can also fairly be called a philosophical horror story about mathematics.[63] Its historical significance is based on the way in which it's situated not just in Pascal's religious philosophy but in his work as one of the pioneers of the field of probability, which he developed with Pierre de Fermat, following the 16th century work of

Gerolamo Cardano. But what is key is the particular vision of God that Pascal had to turn to in order to spring his trap. Probability had proven tremendously effective at banishing the peculiar gods of gamblers' superstitions, a feat gestured to in the very name Pascal's Wager, but in doing so it opened the door to a singularly nasty view of God that amounts to the theological equivalent of the men with guns who kick down your door in the middle of the night. The similarities to Yudkowsky's form of rationality, based as it is in a more contemporary theory of probability than Pascal's prototypical one, are pronounced, right down to the authoritarian horror of the God we are rationally obliged to bow to.

Moldbug junkies requiring further hits of red pill after exhausting all fourteen parts of the *Open Letter* and all eleven existent parts of the *Gentle Introduction* generally turn to the seven-part "How Dawkins Got Pwned." The initial thesis of this work is that atheist public intellectual Richard Dawkins is in fact a "Christian atheist." This may seem like a fairly obvious claim, not least because Dawkins has described himself both as a "secular Christian" and as a "cultural Christian,"[64] but it is more interesting than it sounds for two reasons. First, Moldbug made the claim a few months before Dawkins did, a fact that is almost surely coincidence, but nevertheless constitutes a rare moment of actual insight on Moldbug's part. Second, Moldbug, in a passage quoted at length by Land in *The Dark Enlightenment*, narrows his taxonomy down further, proclaiming, "Dawkins is not just a Christian atheist. He is a Protestant atheist. And he is not just a Protestant atheist. He is a Calvinist atheist. And he is not just a Calvinist atheist. He is an Anglo-Calvinist atheist. In other words, he can be also described as a Puritan atheist, a Dissenter atheist, a Nonconformist atheist, an Evangelical atheist, etc, etc," going on to further tag him as a Ranter, Leveller, Digger, Quaker, and Fifth Monarchist.[65] Moldbug's usual problems with the genetic fallacy abound here, but there's something to it: Dawkins doesn't believe in God, but it's very specifically the Anglican God he doesn't believe in.

A similar line of thought can be applied to Roko's near-flawless recreation of Pascal's Wager, and leads to the same broad theological attributions, namely the European Protestant tradition. And indeed, there is a degree to which this marks the fundamental schism between Moldbug and Yudkowsky, who he actually calls out by name in the course of "How Dawkins Got Pwned," and even accuses of making the same error as Dawkins in a blogpost titled "Interstitial comments on Dawkins."[66] And that error, to be clear, is being a Puritan/Dissenter/Nonconformist, a group Moldbug bluntly describes as

"freaks" whose influence in the present day should be regarded as "a sign of imminent apocalypse" and whose defeat following the death of Oliver Cromwell was "frankly, a damned good riddance."[67] Indeed, Moldbug's chosen political affiliation, the Jacobites, were explicitly a reaction against the values of the Puritans when they re-emerged a generation later in the form of the Glorious Revolution. (Ironically, Moldbug and Yudkowsky are, in practice, culturally Jewish atheists.)

Given all of this, then, there is an interesting moment in the *Open Letter* that is helpful in unveiling a different sort of negation for Moldbug. In the fourth part, after proclaiming himself a Jacobite, he quotes the Jacobite thinker Samuel Johnson's quip that "the first Whig was the Devil." Moldbug proposes to unpack that, saying, "What does it mean that the 'Devil was the first Whig?' What do you think of when you think of the Devil? I always think of Mick Jagger. Surely we can agree that the Devil rode a tank, held a general's rank, when the Blitzkrieg raged and the bodies stank. What Dr. Johnson is proposing is that the Adversary clapped at the Putney Debates, that he smeared his face and shook his tomahawk on the Dartmouth, that he leered and cackled as he swore the Tennis Court Oath. Not that it's a short song, but I don't recall these bits."

Even for Moldbug, this is weak. That Samuel Johnson was not thinking of Mick Jagger when he made his 1778 remark is reasonably obvious, but within the realm of poetic license. That he was also not thinking of the Tennis Court Oath, sworn by members of the Third Estate in the earliest days of the French Revolution in 1789, looks perhaps more like sloppiness. But the really big oversight is the fact that when Samuel Johnson, one of the great Milton scholars of his or any other age, said that the Devil was the first Whig he almost certainly just meant it as an allusion to *Paradise Lost*, a point hammered home in the relevant passage of *The Life of Johnson,* in which Boswell replies to Johnson's quip by quoting Satan's famous declaration, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven."

It is not that Moldbug is unaware of Milton. Indeed, he obligingly quotes the "reign in hell" bit later in Part Four. But he completely avoids actually engaging with this meaning, using Johnson as a frame, with the bulk of Part Four consisting of a typically Moldbuggian ramble about how America is secretly communist and all that, only swerving back to Johnson at his conclusion to proclaim that "all the principles of Whigs, even those which seem austere and noble, are consistent with the objective of seizing power." This is not, to be clear, a case of misunderstanding Johnson, nor even of

Milton. The claim that Milton's Satan espouses a liberal view of the world is a common reading of *Paradise Lost*, as is the observation that Satan is a figure of greed and vanity. Aside from the bits about communism, Moldbug is basically on point about Johnson's meaning.

No, the problem is that Moldbug doesn't seem to realize that Johnson's comment is a vicious barb lobbed at Milton, who was a republican and Cromwell supporter of exactly the sort that Moldbug hates. In suggesting that it is Satan who best represents the Whiggish view and not, as one would expect given Milton's posthumous adoption by the Whigs, the God whose ways Milton seeks to justify to men, Johnson is in effect saying that Milton's magnum opus collapses under its own weight. In fact, this is one of the most venerable rabbit holes in literary criticism, occupying generations of Milton scholars. At its most elemental level the problem is this: *Paradise Lost* repeatedly asserts that God is right and Satan is evil, and yet Satan is self-evidently the best character in it.

To be fair, this is simply not the sort of problem Moldbug is interested in. He's not a literary scholar, and if he's going to dive into old books it's going to be arcane political pamphlets, not theological poetry, and especially not theological poetry from a fucking Dissenter. The trouble is that he should be interested in it, because *Paradise Lost* is a much harder and richer problem than the ones Moldbug likes to tackle. Indeed, to use his parlance, it's a problem that would have pwned him.

Let's start by framing the problem in the most Moldbug-friendly way we can, which is to say as Johnson would have understood it, although it's going to quickly slither out of such an easy grasp. For Johnson, Milton was the honorable opposition. He was venerable enough to be one of the sources Johnson turned to most in his *Dictionary of the English Language*, but he was also a figure who needed to be actively rebelled against. On a stylistic level, Johnson objected to his use of blank verse and excessive allusions; on a personal level, he disdained his Puritan and republican ideas.[68] So the claim that the Devil was the first Whig is, for Johnson, a sneaky reclamation of Milton from his own politics. If it is Satan who best espouses the political views of Milton's followers within *Paradise Lost* then Milton becomes a crypto-Tory, illustrating through God's triumph the reasons why absolute monarchy is superior to Whiggish liberalism. That's why it's such an effective bon mot.

Well, that and the fact that it's actually a pretty fair characterization of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's vision of God is very much in the authoritarian tradition of Pascal and Yudkowsky—a figure defined by his offer of a strictly binary

deal between salvation and damnation. And what's crucial about Milton's God is that it's an active offer on his part: he creates the situation whereby one is damned or saved. As he puts it, speaking of Satan's fall, "Whose fault? Whose but his own? Ingrate, he had of me all he could have; I made him just and right, sufficient to have stood, though free to fall. Such I created all the ethereal Powers And Spirits, both them who stood, and them who fail'd; freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell."[69] Freedom is something granted by a sovereign God, whose sovereignty is an inherent condition of the universe, a fact emphasized by the way that, following the fifty-four line speech by God about how free he made man and how man is the author of its own destiny, Milton offers a description of how "while God spake, ambrosial fragrance fill'd all Heaven, and in the blessed Spirits elect sense of new joy ineffable diffus'd."[70] Or, to put it another way, God's farts, like the King's, smell like roses.

Actually, what's really surprising here is just how Moldbuggian this all sounds. The freedom to stand or fall is visibly just the right to exit as imposed by King Jobs, rightful sovereign of California. God's ambrosial fragrance is no more or less than the ultimate Formalist account of rightful power. Never mind being a crypto-Tory, Milton's a crypto-neoreactionary. There's only one teensy little problem: Milton's God is a dick.

The key moment comes in the middle of the fifty-four line speech, when God attempts to justify the basic decision to give man free will. Which is, after all, a fair question. Asking rhetorically what would have happened if he had not made man free, God asks, "What praise could they receive? What pleasure I from such obedience paid."[71] The choice of words is genuinely chilling: pleasure. The choice to kneel or exit is imposed for no reason other than because the sovereign desires to be obeyed. This is raw sadism. It's the sort of thing Moldbug accuses Whigs of when he says, "The Whig is concerned with his own power rather than with the state of society."[72] Except, wait, the Devil's supposed to be the Whig here.

One imagines that Moldbug would not be particularly troubled by this knot. Milton's a Dissenter, after all—that he can't take the side of God or the Devil without his awful greed for power showing only proves it. But we're literally talking about the book that invented the Devil as a figure by unifying the serpent in Genesis, the ruler of Hell, and the occasional figure in Christian mythology of an angel cast down from heaven into a coherent single vision. It's not a minor question. Nor is it one that's irrelevant to our larger project.

Milton's God is visibly based in the same malevolence that makes Roko's Basilisk and the men with guns who kick down your door in the middle of the night so awful. In many ways it is the option that's even worse than the Exterminator, which is at least indifferent as opposed to sadistic.

But more than that, it's a question Moldbug's at least partially on the hook for, whether he wants to be or not. After all, the corollary to his claim that Dawkins is a Dissenter atheist is that he himself is a Jacobite one. He's still firmly enmeshed in the exact same Christian tradition as Dawkins; he's just picked the other side of one particular 18th century political divide. Which is to say that this vision of God as a sovereign authority matters to Moldbug. Especially because, let's face it, Moldbug's beloved English monarchy was exactly what it was designed to be a legitimizing myth for. God and the King look the same for a reason, and it's not because Henry VIII was Yahweh's problematic fave. So our hypothetical Moldbug can't just call all of this Dissenter heresy and be done with it, even if Milton's not his cup of tea.

Moldbug's system has an obvious fix available for the problem. Sure, the particular iteration of the sovereign that the Dissenter freak John Milton cooked up is a sadistic pervert, but there's a way to fix that, whether it be the tidy corporate maneuvering of Moldbug's system or just a good old-fashioned "hunting accident." And if the situation's well and truly fucked, well, there's always the right of exit.

Trouble is, Milton's thought of these exact same things, and has had Satan do all of them. That's literally the plot of *Paradise Lost*: Satan tries and fails to kill God, then leaves to set up his own kingdom. Which is to say, and this is actually fairly obvious when you think about it, it's possible that a bunch of people who are calling themselves Dissenters are aware that there are people who are going to call them heretical freaks.

In other words, Milton is well aware that he gave the Devil what he considered to be a reasonably compelling argument, which is to say, one based on his own proto-Whiggish beliefs, and is similarly aware that his vision of a superior argument, as espoused by God, is going to prove repulsive to royalist scum like Johnson and Moldbug. From this perspective, Johnson's claim that the Devil is the first Whig becomes little more than a recognition of the basilisk already implicit in Milton's decision to cast the Devil as the first reactionary. Which is to say that even if Moldbug isn't terribly interested in Milton, Milton can still be read as very much interested in Moldbug, and indeed as having plausibly anticipated the bulk of Moldbug's arguments.

Let us, experimentally, put Milton's Devil at the black heart of Moldbug's philosophical labyrinth. I do not, to be clear, mean to suggest this as some

definitive form of the monstrous offspring. Milton's Devil is one of the greatest characters in English literature, but he's still a straw man set up so that Milton's dick God can triumph over him. But if Milton's Devil is the first Whig then he is also, at the end of the day, what Moldbug is fleeing from, and so serves as a mirror through which we can look at whatever it is that's going to devour him when he reaches the center of his maze. It will not be enough to identify Moldbug's monster, but it will at least give us a sense of what it looks like.

It's important, first of all, to understand that the Devil is something Moldbug is genuinely revolted by, and this revulsion shows through in his work. Over and over again, Moldbug insists that order, law, and the concept of goodness are interchangeable synonyms, whereas chaos is inherently a force for evil and indeed the very definition of evil. In one particularly florid passage of a minor blogpost he goes so far as to flatly proclaim that "Satan is the Lord of Chaos and the Father of Lies," which is a pretty impressive bit of vitriol from an atheist.[73]

And in this regard it is not hard to see his objection. Consider Satan at the start of *Paradise Lost*, moments after the Fall. Milton describes Satan's position in absolute terms: "a dungeon horrible" that consists only of "sights of woe, Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace And rest can never dwell, hope never comes That comes to all, but torture without end." "Such place," Milton says, "Eternal Justice has prepared For those rebellious." It is as brutal a display of formalist power as exists, and yet in its face Satan jumps up and takes charge and issues one of the most famous speeches in English literature, proclaiming that for all of God's strength, "Not for those, Nor what the potent Victor in his rage Can else inflict, do I repent, or change," proclaiming that there is nothing God can do that will make him "bow and sue for grace With suppliant knee, and deify his power."[74]

Clearly unacceptable. But in some ways more horrifying is Satan's monologue in Book Four in which he contemplates redemption, asking, "Is there no place Left for repentance, none for pardon left? None left but by submission; and that word Disdain forbids me," and noting that even if he did repent, "How soon Would highth recall high thoughts, how soon unsay What feigned submission swore? Ease would recant Vows made in pain, as violent and void." In other words, Satan's defiance goes beyond any mere choice. He did not vote for revolution. Rather, he is an intrinsic and inevitable force of revolution, incapable of doing anything but defying authority. As he puts it, in the speech's most famous line, "Myself am hell."

But in his complete revulsion Moldbug overstates his case and misses the devil's actual appeal. To Moldbug Satan is indistinguishable from his figure of the wild man, fit only for life out in the forest due to his insistence on randomly killing people in the street. But for all that Milton portrays Satan as bestial, this isn't why he's one of the greatest characters in the history of literature. What's crucial about Milton's Satan is that he is capable of masking his bestial nature in the clothing of civilization. He is monstrous, but his monstrosity is expressed in moving and beautifully written speeches. He is an effective leader—indeed second only to God within the story, bringing a full third of the angels under his command. And he is an intensely seductive, charming figure—indeed, his main action in the plot is the successful temptation of Eve. He's even positioned as a figure of science and technology, nearly turning the tide of the War in Heaven with his invention of "engines and their balls / Of missive ruin; part incentive reed / Provide, pernicious with one touch to fire."[75]

This is still perfectly compatible with Moldbug, requiring only that we ally Satan with the Cathedral, which is of course what Johnson was doing by allying him specifically with an organized political party in the form of the Whigs. Moldbug's just getting over-excited with the wild man. But as we've seen, that over-excitement is a common error for him, and indeed for neoreactionaries in general: they repeatedly go straight for the most extreme negation available. Even the usually subtle Nick Land ends up committing the foul in the course of proclaiming Hitler to be the metaphysical absolute form of evil, asking, rhetorically, "Does anybody within the (Cathedral's) globalized world still think that Adolf Hitler was less evil than the Prince of Darkness himself? Perhaps only a few scattered paleo-Christians (who stubbornly insist that Satan is really, really bad), and an even smaller number of Neo-Nazi ultras (who think Hitler was kind of cool)," going on to make an aesthetic distinction between Satan and the Antichrist, arguing that Hitler serves as the latter—"a mirror Messiah, of reversed moral polarity."[76]

This distinction is useful, although it requires us to theorize the position that Land doesn't—of a Satanic negation as opposed to an Antichristic one. One based not in a complete reversal, but in something subtler and more ambiguous: subversion. This is the maneuver, after all, that makes Satan so compelling, especially in that first speech: he grants God's dominion and absolute power, acknowledging that he has been cast down and defeated, but then asserts his independence. In other words, he says yes before he says no. This is, notably, the exact reverse of Thacker's formulation of horror

philosophy as emerging from a series of negations that eventually lead to a moment where doubt stops, although it serves much the same purpose. (Indeed, it is arguably the process of philosophical horror as experienced by the reader, who grants each of the philosopher's negations until reaching the cop-out of their acquiescence and objecting, thus reaching the awful truth the philosopher could not bear to contemplate.)

It is here that Satan becomes a real problem for Mencius Moldbug. The issue is simple: Moldbug hates the player, but he loves the game. Satan's eternal dissent repulses him, but he's head over heels for his rhetorical strategy. "Yes, but" is Moldbug's entire argumentative structure. Look at his initial moves in both the *Open Letter* and the *Gentle Introduction*. In the *Open Letter* he takes care to start from a position of sympathy with his rhetorically constructed progressive: "I am not a progressive, but I was raised as one. I live in San Francisco, I grew up as a Foreign Service brat, I went to Brown, I've been brushing my teeth with Tom's of Maine since the mid-80s." And then, in the paragraph's final sentence, the but: "What happened to me is that I lost my trust."[77] Similarly the *Gentle Introduction*, where the move is explicitly flagged in a paragraph beginning "we'll start with a point of agreement." Yes: "As a good citizen of America, which is the greatest country on earth, one thing you believe in is separation of church and state. I too am an American, and it so happens that I too believe in separation of church and state." But: "Although one might argue that my interpretation of the formula is a little different than yours."[78]

This isn't just the honed rhetoric of a good pitchman, not least because Moldbug's a mediocrity at it. Moldbug's addicted to the "but." It's his first choice argumentative move in almost every situation: he formulates some bit of centrist common sense, then complains about it. For instance (I'm reaching deeply and arbitrarily into the *Open Letter* here just to get him at his default setting—let's go with Part Seven), when he attempts to convince his rhetorical progressive that they secretly hate democracy, but that they only hate it under the name of politics, Moldbug says, "Think of the associations that the words political, partisan, politician, and so on, produce in your mind. You say: George W. Bush politicized the Justice Department. And this is a brutal indictment. If you hated black people the way you hate politics, you might say George W. Bush negroized the Justice Department, and the phrase would carry the same payload of contempt. Similarly, when you hear antonyms such as apolitical, nonpartisan, bipartisan, or even the new and truly ludicrous post-partisan, your heart thrills with warmth and affection." And then, in the face

of this yes, he introduces his but—a supposed anomaly given that "politics" are bad but "democracy" is good, namely that "when you hear the phrase 'apolitical democracy,' it sounds slightly off."

Now, never mind that this is a load of complete horseshit, that his "yes" is an insincere cliché of bad punditry as opposed to an attempt to formulate a thoughtful statement that a progressive might agree to, that his elision of "political" and "partisan" is sloppy and furthermore undermines his subversion in that the phrase "nonpartisan democracy" is actually perfectly coherent, and that we accidentally caught him at his other default setting of gratuitous race-baiting. The point is stylistic. And he goes on to do things like this throughout Part Seven, just as he does throughout everything he writes, endlessly throwing up little anomalies, generally found through idiosyncratic and selective readings of primary sources, adding "but" after "but" until at last he presents, with a flourish, his blandly Antichristic negation of the initial premise and says, "So therefore this, right?"

But perhaps the bigger giveaway of Moldbug's Satanic sympathies is just the fact that he prances about calling himself a fucking Sith Lord through most of the *Gentle Introduction*. I mean, this was always Moldbug's basic problem: he wants to be an edgy rebel, and he's just not. And he ultimately even admits this, in his pitch for the red pill. The whole reason for taking it is pleasure: "It's just too much fun to see your old reality from the outside."[79] The red pill is obviously Satanic; indeed, what other terms can Satan's rebellion be described in besides "dude took the red pill hard?" But moreover, the fun of seeing your old reality from the outside is plainly what Milton's Satan desires in proclaiming that his refusal to kneel is a victory over God. And the truth is that when Moldbug describes the "sodium-metal core, which will sear your throat like a live coal" of his red pill, well, it's hard not to think that sounds rather like chaos, not order. And that's the tragic irony: there is nobody in Moldbug's system quite so despicable as the likes of a Dissenter like Mencius Moldbug. He is, as William Blake famously said of Milton, of the Devil's party, but doesn't know it.

Now Blake, of course, was a proper Dissenter in the most gloriously freakish tradition. A literal visionary who turned his revelations into apocalyptic and revolutionary art, and who ultimately positioned himself as a sort of loving and respectful Satan to Milton himself, expanding on his worldview, both political and religious, and annexing it to the strange and bespoke mythology of eternal conflict between the coldly rational force of Urizen and the fiery and generative Los, Blake provides a sort of monstrosity

that poses to Moldbug's system what Iain M. Banks called an Outside Context Problem, and described in terms of a dominant tribe on a mid-sized and fertile island watching "when suddenly this bristling lump of iron appears sailless and trailing steam in the bay and these guys carrying long funny-looking sticks come ashore and announce you've just been discovered, you're all subjects of the Emperor now, he's keen on presents called tax and these bright-eyed holy men would like a word with your priests."[80]

Banks, however, also notes that these are the sorts of problems that civilizations "tended to encounter rather in the same way a sentence encountered a full stop," and that's a form of negation rather beyond the merely Satanic, so let's go back and zero in on one detail of our Satanic reading of Moldbug, namely the quip that Satan took the red pill. This makes, of course, two characters in our tale to have done so, the other being Nick Land. Whose "Dark Enlightenment" is, indeed, nothing more than a "yes, but" to the work of Moldbug. Could this be the reason we have been stuck circling our rhetorical prey for so long without quite getting our shot in? Could it be that the beast has already been killed, stuffed, and mounted upon the wall of another thinker? Are we about to discover, in a stunning third act twist, that the monster has been Nick Land all along?

IV.

"It sure looked like the ending. It sure looked like the goal. It sure looked beautiful, but beauty only wants control. I could've drunk the wisdom; the dignified response. But I had to go and knock the door to everything at once."—Seeming, "Holy Fire"

Of course not: we're not even halfway done. But yes, obviously that's what Land is doing. The important thing, though, is how he does the deed. *The Dark Enlightenment* is one long "yes, but" to Moldbug, but it's not written to Moldbug in any sense. Despite being important as the essay with which Land became a neoreactionary in the sense of becoming one of the fundamental thinkers of the movement—getting in, if you will—it is written as the essay in which Land becomes a neoreactionary in the sense of coming out to his previous academic audience. And it reads like one. He only gets around to bringing up these new friends he's been hanging around with a few paragraphs in, and he doesn't actually mention the boyfriend for another ten or so. And then things really get started.

But let's look at how Land gets from "hey mom, hey dad" to "meet Mencius," because it helps explain how he's using Moldbug, and thus what the "but" is. He presents Moldbug as an example of a "reactionary progressive" or of "reactionary modernism," which he positions as a coherent intellectual tradition reaching back to Thomas Hobbes that always insisted this democracy business was a bad idea. So when Moldbug is finally wheeled on stage, it's as the sort of arch-example of this turn: the libertarian who became a monarchist. And while Land clearly admires Moldbug, he blatantly presents him as a fascinating freak, a fact that becomes almost cruelly evident when he gets to "How Dawkins Got Pwned," and, discussing Moldbug quoting Dawkins quoting Huxley, offers a grossly homophobic description of how "Moldbug seems to be holding Huxley's hand, and … (ewww!) doing that palm-stroking thing with his finger. This sure ain't vanilla-libertarian reaction anymore—it's getting seriously dark, and scary." And with this, Land's essay makes its irrevocable turn into race.

In some ways this is the heart of the Satanic inversion of Moldbug. I mean, what else was it going to be? Even the most sympathetic reading of Moldbug is going to hit "but he's a blithering racist" eventually, and an account of him that doesn't deal with that fact is going to be inadequate at best and actively disingenuous at worst. But Land, crucially, isn't offering "but racism" as a refutation of Moldbug; that's not really how Satanic inversion works, and anyway, it's a response so obvious even Moldbug explicitly anticipated it.[81] Rather, he's offering it as the fundamentally monstrous part of Moldbug, a

fact that becomes evident in Part Four of *The Dark Enlightenment*, the last "proper" part before parts 4a through 4f, which consist mainly of Land hand-wringing extensively over race. (Moldbug hand-wrings over race a lot too, to be clear, but like most things Moldbug does, it's just better when Land does it.)

Land opens Part Four with something very much like the point we just made at some length, discussing how "without a taste for irony, Mencius Moldbug is all but unendurable, and certainly unintelligible. Vast structures of historical irony shape his writings, at times even engulfing them. How otherwise could a proponent of traditional configurations of social order—a self-proclaimed Jacobite—compose a body of work that is stubbornly dedicated to subversion?" At this point anyone with a rudimentary understanding of how this sort of game is played is sitting up in their chairs and watching with rapt attention as Land lines up his shot.

Land continues by focusing on Moldbug's decision to label the credo of the Cathedral as "Universalism," focusing in particular on the way in which the Declaration of Independence visibly dodges the question of justifying its claim "that all men are created equal" by proclaiming it self-evident when, as Land observes, this is actually not particularly self-evident and was, at the time of writing, quite a novel idea largely unsupported by the preceding centuries of western civilization. Moreover, it's an emphatic declaration of faith. But, as Land puts it, "Since the Cathedral has ascended to global supremacy, it no longer has need for Founding Fathers, who awkwardly recall its parochial ancestry, and impede its transnational public relations. Rather, it seeks perpetual re-invigoration through their denigration."

But, and now we reach the coup de grace, just as the Cathedral has to endlessly repudiate the very religious faith from which its philosophical cornerstones were carved, "So is its trend to consistently neo-fascist political economy smoothed by the concerted repudiation of a 'neo-nazi' (or paleo-fascist) threat. It is extremely convenient, when constructing ever more nakedly corporatist or 'third position' structures of state-directed pseudo-capitalism, to be able to divert attention to angry expressions of white racial paranoia, especially when these are ornamented by clumsily modified nazi insignia, horned helmets, Leni Riefenstahl aesthetics, and slogans borrowed freely from *Mein Kampf*." Now, of course, Land is several premises to the wind here, and the reaction of loudly clearing your throat and suggesting that he has in no way sufficiently unpacked the concept of the Cathedral's "trend to consistently neo-fascist political economy" to simply deploy it so casually is wholly appropriate. But we're already in the position of having said "yes" to

Moldbug, so we can't really get out of the car just because it's visibly hurtling towards a cliff.

At this point Land gets around to talking about the way "Moldbug offers a sanitized white nationalist blog reading list, consisting of writers who—to varying degrees of success—avoid immediate reversion to paleo-fascist self-parody," at which point he starts using the language that gives away the game. For instance, he refers to one blog as "the ripped outer edge of Moldbug's carefully truncated spectrum," as part of "a decaying orbit, spiraling into the great black hole that is hidden at the dead center of modern political possibility," and finally as the gateway "into the crushing abyss where light dies." What's key is the contrast between this language and the description of Moldbug's "sanitized" list—the tacit accusation that Moldbug is insufficiently willing to take the plunge into white nationalism. And he eventually circles back, looking both at Moldbug's evident hesitation and stream of "I'm not a white nationalist" disclaimers and at the way in which Moldbug justifies his tentative interest in and non-rejection of the position. This is clearly the meat of it for Land—the point at which he's out-Moldbugged Moldbug to create something even more terrifying. Certainly it served to make him a popular figure among the audience of racist trolls that Moldbug was about to abandon.

But Land, revealingly, does something thoroughly unlike himself at this point and hesitates. Part of this comes from a fundamental rhetorical problem with what Land does. Like Moldbug, and to a lesser extent Yudkowsky, Land is a red pill merchant. But the red pill is a rhetorical impossibility—an emphatic endpoint to any line of thought. The two actual red pills we've identified in our explorations so far—Satan's fall and Nick Land's going mad—are notable for being relative full stops in the course of their intellectual trajectories. Both Satan and Land go on for some length after taking the red pill, it's true, but the main event's clearly come and gone. So much as Land plays the "crushing abyss where light dies" card, let's be honest, the "John Derbyshire makes some good points" card he plays almost immediately after is one deserving of a long, loud chorus of "laaaaaaaaame."[82]

And Land clearly knows it. He's withering in his assessment of his first blatantly racist writer, describing the "pitifully constricted, stereotypical circuit" of his writing. Or there's his description of the rest of the neoreactionary movement: "Start digging into the actually existing 'reactosphere', and things get quite astoundingly ugly very quickly." Or even his grim assessment that "if reaction ever became a popular movement, its few slender threads of bourgeois (or perhaps dreamily 'aristocratic') civility

wouldn't hold back the beast for long." Sure, Land, apocalypse-fetishist that he is, doesn't actually care all that much if the racist beast gets let off his chain, but he alternates between cringing at his new friends and flopping with relief at how glad he is to be in China, away from this madness. Which begs the question of what the hell he's doing courting these morons.

The answer, broadly speaking, is that he imagines there's something useful to be found in this sewer. He is the materialist of the trio, after all. As he puts it, "When a sane, pragmatic, and fact-based negotiation of human differences is forbidden by ideological fiat, the alternative is not a reign of perpetual peace, but a festering of increasingly self-conscious and militantly defiant thoughtcrime, nourished by publicly unavowable realities, and energized by powerful, atavistic, and palpably dissident mythologies." Which isn't actually the single dumbest thing ever said, although one gets the sense that perhaps Land's definition of "sane, pragmatic, and fact-based negotiation of human differences" is not particularly any of these things. But the sense that perhaps we could do a better job of talking about race is not exactly a proposition restricted to the right. Indeed, one rather suspects white centrists are about the only people happy with the "we solved racism in the 1960s so let's stop talking about it" consensus.

But what Land is angling for is not actually this fabled "sensible conversation about race," and the idea that it might exist in some hypothetical alternate space isn't terribly important to what he's doing except inasmuch as it provides some vague hope that what he's trying to do isn't based entirely on deranged morons. He is, after all, still firmly in the monster business, and monsters are rarely described as "sane, pragmatic, and fact-based." Indeed, Land's real problem here is that the noxious idiocy of white nationalists is actually his favorite thing about them, just because it's so utterly horrifying to the liberal consensus. But it's worth, as a result, flipping to the end and looking at how he ends the whole sprawling bit of madness.

Part 4f of *The Dark Enlightenment* is entitled "Approaching the Bionic Horizon," which is to say, that nice techno-capitalist Singularity that Land has been trying to approach all career. In this case he defines the term as "the threshold of conclusive nature-culture fusion at which a population becomes indistinguishable from its technology." And, in a move that vividly highlights just how far afield from his newly acquired crowd of racist moron fans he actually is, he immediately analogizes it to the work of Octavia Butler, the renowned black feminist science fiction writer, and specifically her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, which is largely about interbreeding between humans and a tentacle-covered trisexual race called the Oankali. To paraphrase Land as he describes

Moldbug's infatuation with Huxley's racism, this sure ain't vanilla-white nationalist racism anymore.

From here he jumps to biologist and National Vanguard contributor John H. Campbell, who he calls "a prophet of monstrosity" and quotes at length describing the way in which evolution itself evolves over time, suggesting a new sort of eugenics based around high-end ultra-expensive genetic engineering on the part of the rich and powerful who, with this staggering technology at their disposal, would only become more so, essentially seceding from humanity to form a new successor species. As Land puts it, "For racial nationalists, concerned that their grandchildren should look like them, Campbell is the abyss. Miscegenation doesn't get close to the issue. *Think face tentacles.*" (Emphasis his.) From this perspective, he suggests, in the essay's closing two sentences, "Whatever emerges from the dialectics of racial terror remains trapped in trivialities. It's time to move on."

It's a deliciously mocking, cheeky conclusion—the use of "move on" evokes, of course, a sense of traditional progressive history—indeed, it's the name of an American leftist PAC, a use one suspects Land was aware of when he picked it as the closing line of his epic. So Land's trolling on a large scale here, positing his bio-technological supplanting of the human race (held tediously but pointlessly back by the Cathedral) as a sort of ultimate culmination and horror reading of both reactionary and progressive thought. And it's true, the consolidation of genetic technology among the rich and powerful is indeed a plausible nightmare for humanity. But that still doesn't make it terribly appealing. If nothing else, it just doesn't feel like a path through John Derbyshire and the "human biodiversity" crowd is the best available way to approach our end. Let us assume that we are fucked, sure. Perhaps even let us assume that the way out is, as Land insists it must be, some form of secession in which a limited pool of humanity bails out in some form. But must the abyss be so boring?

The problem is, it's hard to get a "but" in on Land. Unlike Moldbug and Yudkowsky, he's actually legitimately good at this whole philosophy thing. He's well aware of the tradition of horror readings and monstrosity in philosophy, and knows how to wall off the most obvious in-roads. Chipping away at the edges of his racialism isn't irrelevant, but the truth is that it's mostly pretty easy to patch his argument about the utility of racist idiots and just get to the bionic horizon via other means, and he knows it.

So you'll excuse me if I pause for a moment and take on conceptual reinforcements before throwing myself into this task. To wit, China Miéville, the Marxist thinker and "sinister-punk writer" as Land describes him (see, I

didn't cheat) in "Abstract Horror," has theorized monstrosity at admirable length. Land, for his part, complains that Miéville's "horror projects typically fail the test of abstraction," which on the one hand can generally be laughingly dismissed on the grounds that Miéville, as a Marxist materialist, can hardly be said to have failed at something he clearly never attempted, and on the other hand is more or less the entire point of this current excursion.

Miéville writes at length on the distinction between two modes of horror: the hauntological and the Weird.[83] The former, epitomized by the figure of the ghost (which Miéville adamantly separates from the monster as a category), is linked to the Gothic tradition. The threat is dead, buried, or repressed, and calls into question the integrity of the present, revealing it to be eaten or succumbing to the awful inescapability of the past. The Weird, on the other hand, is not old so much as *ancient*—not buried but lost, forgotten, or, ideally, never really knowable in the first place. Its true nature, however, is outsideness. Hauntology comes from within us; the Weird from outside.

Moldbug, for instance, is clearly hauntological. It's baked into his basic premise: the losing side of the English Civil War is back, and it thinks this silly little democracy experiment has really gone on long enough. A spectre is haunting Europe and all. Roko's Basilisk, on the other hand, is firmly Weird—a cruel and inhuman intelligence from the future that reaches back towards us. But which is Land? For the most part he seems firmly in the camp of the Weird. Certainly that's the swipe he's taking at Miéville when he suggests that his horrors are insufficiently abstract: Mieville's of the ghosts' party and doesn't know it. And it's where Land's going with his genetically engineered face tentacles, or the looming but inexpressible horror of *Phyl-Undhu*, a world described as "already winter, and the darkness was slow to ebb. Through the unveiled kitchen window they could see across the street, which was patchily illuminated by sparse suburban street lighting, cold bluish neon feeding shadows. A random speckling of warmer night lights dotted the houses opposite. Roofs were dusted with early snow, catching the luminosity of Earth's dead satellite, which hung, huge and low, in a purple-black sky."

And yet let's look at a couple of phrases as Land describes his beloved army of Crackers. "America's racial 'original sin' was foundational." "As liberal decency has severed itself from intellectual integrity, and exiled harsh truths, these truths have found new allies, and become considerably harsher." And, of course, his description of the "festering" and "atavistic" nature of repressed white nationalism.[84] That's hauntological through and through. Which isn't exactly a surprise if one thinks about white nationalism. But it's still puzzling

to see Land, arch-theorist of the Weird, only able to muster some lame hauntological racists for his big rhetorical turning point. What's going on, and what does it have to do with Land's swipe at Miéville's lack of abstraction, aside from being a case of the pot calling the kettle black?

The thing is, Miéville's more than aware of the way these two can blur. He describes the two categories as a "non-dialectic opposition, contrary iterations of a single problematic." Indeed, he points out that synthesizing the two is perfectly straightforward, positing a creature he calls the Skulltopus, which combines the hauntological skull with tentacles, but, as he suggests, "There is something not right about it—the two components may imply one another but are resistant to syncrex." Instead he suggests that this is something of a proper opposition "in a manner suggestive of quantum superposition."[85]

But what's key is that either one will generally do. "The traces of the Weird," Miéville says, "are inevitably sensible in a hauntological work, and vice versa."[86] The horror can emerge from within or penetrate from without, but the end result is basically the same. And the tension is one Miéville plays with constantly in his fiction, a tendency perhaps perfectly summed up by the fact that he follows his dismissal of the functionality of the Skulltopus by enthusiastically drawing one, and appends an earlier draft to the end of the essay. Flitting between the two positions is Miéville's modus operandi. And it's something that Land, with his overt preference for the Weird, can legitimately be accused of missing, especially when he slips thoughtlessly into the hauntological. Finally, a chink we can shove a giant fucking sword through. Or, better yet, a hypodermic needle. So let's drug Nick Land up with some red pill, hijack his entire philosophical edifice, and plunge it into an abyss that, while possibly no less terrifying than his, is at least funnier and less full of lame racists. To quote a different Keanu Reeves film, party on dudes.[87]

Clearly we're going to have to understand red pills then. Thankfully we have quite a lot of good resources for that in the ground we've already covered, enough so that we're almost spoiled for choice. But let's start with Moldbug, if only to get it out of the way. Specifically, "How Dawkins Got Pwned," which begins with a typically discursive analysis of the basic concept of pwnage, which Moldbug defines, per Wikipedia, as "to take unauthorized control of someone else or something belonging to someone else by exploiting a vulnerability."[88] So that's handy.

Moldbug unpacks this in terms of Dawkins' own famed biological metaphor for ideas as "memes," focusing on the idea of a parasitic memeplex,

which is to say, a hostile and destructive cluster of ideas. Being Moldbug, he approaches this in preposterously Manichean terms: "When we see two populations of memes in conflict, we know both cannot be healthy, because a healthy meme is true by definition and the truth cannot conflict with itself."[89] Which, hahahaha, no. I mean, you don't even need to plunge into postmodern notions of multiple and variant truths to recognize that, when we're working in any sort of immunology, biological or memetic, the notion of "healthy" and "unhealthy" is not a straightforward binary nor a situation where something is reliably one or the other. Readers interested in theorizing this in detail might try introducing words like "chemotherapy" into the discussion.

But to this end, Moldbug contemplates the idea of a "generic parasitic memeplex" and how one might come up with a generalized immune response to it. The goal here is, as Moldbug puts it, "a formula for total world domination," which is to say, spoilers, he's just looking to reverse engineer the Cathedral according to a more or less arbitrarily imported heuristic of contagion, morbidity, and persistence. This results in most of the mistakes you'd expect, which is to say that he identifies seemingly random parts of the Protestant tradition and then comes up with reasons why they're especially clever and vicious adaptations suitable for maximum pwnage. The high point of this is when he decides that asceticism offers "a clear adaptive advantage" because the only people who can be ascetics are the rich and powerful, so it serves as a status marker. (Yes, you read that right—Moldbug suggests that asceticism is a fast track to popularity, and then uses the wealthy as an example.)[90]

But there's a larger problem, which is that Moldbug is, broadly speaking, using the engineering technology of the red pill to try to build the Cathedral. Pwnage is clearly a red pill sort of concept. Indeed, they're both firmly from the same technophilic cyberpunk aesthetic that is, at the end of the day, the fundamental connection among Moldbug, Yudkowsky, and Land. And that aesthetic is very much based around a sort of individual targeting. The word we're circling around, obviously, is "hacking," and as oversignified as the word is, it's not actually a bad image for what we're talking about. The red pill, pwnage, and for that matter the horror reading, monstrous offspring, and Satanic inversions all follow the same basic pattern—a sort of conceptual infiltration of someone's thought in which their own methods and systems are used against them. Done as a philosophical move—whether on the conceptual level of Deleuze's monstrous offspring and Thacker's horror reading or the individual level of Dawkins' supposed pwnage and Land's genuine break—it

requires the creation of a rhetorical construct to engage in dialogue with the target. The hacker is as fine a model as Satan for this, as is the virologist imagined by Moldbug in his "generic parasitic memeplex" engineering.

The problem is simple: this cannot possibly be how the Cathedral works. It's not spread by this sort of intimate contact. And this is evident in the sort of ridiculous parameters Moldbug is setting out for it. Contagion, for instance, takes place, in Moldbug's mind, both through parental and educational transmission (which is to say as an ideology drummed into people from birth in the same way that "God chose the King so you cannot question him" was) and through social transmission, which he defines as "informal transmission among adults, following existing social networks," which, if you guessed that his example of how not to do that would be "Nazis," good work. So he proclaims that "our parasite should be *intellectually fashionable*. All the cool people in town should want to get infected."[91] This is idiotic in ways so fundamental that it is almost easy to miss amidst the idiosyncratic detail of Moldbug's approach: why the fuck would the Cathedral still want to be transmitting among adults according to notions of coolness, which is after all pretty fundamentally opposed to the notion of educational transmission? The phrase is not "just as cool as school." What Moldbug clearly wants in engineering the Cathedral is for social transmission to be a means of maintaining an ideology that people have already been indoctrinated into. But because he's approaching it from a model of pwnage he ends up fundamentally building it wrong, trying to make it good at infecting people it's already got. Or, to put it another way, what happens to Dawkins isn't pwnage. And while it is still worth understanding, this isn't quite the context we care about doing it in.

Instead, let's pick at this idea of pwnage through conversation—what we might describe as textual hacking. Framed in those terms two important examples present themselves. The first is Eliezer Yudkowsky, for whom it's something of a regular concern. The error he flees from is very much a textual one—the idea of an argument that is compelling but irrational. The entire point of his pseudo-Bayesian style is that it is supposedly resistant to pwnage. But Yudkowsky's most explicit and intriguing engagement with the phenomenon comes in the form of the AI-Box Experiment. Like Roko's Basilisk, this is an element of Yudkowsky's thought that is notable for attracting more attention from people who aren't Yudkowsky than it did from him. Unlike the Basilisk, however, it is not a problem for Yudkowsky's

thought, but an actually kind of cool idea. Indeed, it's one of the reasons why intelligent people with real achievements have taken Yudkowsky seriously.

Like any self-respecting bit of Yudkowsky, it exists to solve a deeply idiosyncratic problem. Specifically, it addresses a theoretical argument about whether a particular type of AI research that's not actually possible right now is safe. The problem is simple enough: obviously we want to build a superintelligent AI to run the world. But that could be dangerous—what if it's an unfriendly AI that wants to take over the world like in *The Matrix* or *Terminator 3* or something? So we build the AI in a secure and isolated computer that can't start taking over random systems or anything—a box, if you will. The question is this: is that safe? Yudkowsky argues that it is not, because a superintelligent AI would be able to talk its way out of the box. Or, to offer the hypothesis in his precise formulation, "I think a transhuman can take over a human mind through a text-only terminal."[92] And he proposes the AI Box experiment as a means of demonstrating that this is true. In it, two people make a monetary bet and then role-play out a dialogue between a boxed AI and a person given the authority to decide whether to let it out or not in which the AI tries to talk its way out of the box. And it is important to stress that it is role-played: valid exchanges can include things like: "Give me a cure for cancer and I'll let you out." "OK here." "You are now free."

Depending on your perspective, Yudkowsky either completely misunderstands why this is interesting or understands it too well for his own good. The answer is not, obviously, because this is a pressing issue that requires settling. Rather, it is because it's the setup of a really good science fiction story, and indeed of several classics. What is interesting is less the rules than the content of the debate itself—how the AI presents its case and what strategies it uses to try to talk its way out, and what the human does and doesn't consider valid evidence of the AI's good nature. Much more interesting than "who will win and what does that say about AI research" is the simple drama of it—one imagines any actual rendition of the experiment would be fascinating to read. Yudkowsky, however, treated this as an actively useful game that helped demonstrate the correctness of his views. Indeed, he played the game five times under officially codified rules, winning twice against people from within his community, then winning one out of three times against people who he suspected were not actually convinced his proposition was wrong but were "just curious" and willing to offer thousands of dollars as stakes before quitting the game because, as he put it, "I didn't like the person I turned into when I started to lose."[93]

Like I said, it's the sort of thing you really want to read the transcripts of, especially of the three he won. So it's fascinating that Yudkowsky has refused to release said transcripts, saying that people "learn to respect the unknown unknowns."[94] Which is to say that he thinks what's most important about the game is what it reveals for strategies in AI research, as opposed to what it reveals about people. The result is something that mostly just reveals things about Eliezer Yudkowsky, like, "he's crap at recognizing his own best ideas."

But for all of that, it's clear that Yudkowsky has a healthy respect for the idea that it's possible to pwn a human consciousness through words alone, and a regard for the artistry and beauty involved in the attempt. Indeed, Yudkowsky has credited the idea (contrary to those who suggested he nicked it from *Terminator 3*) to the scene in *Silence of the Lambs* in which Hannibal Lecter convinces a fellow inmate to commit suicide simply by talking to him from another cell[95]—a magnificent instance of textual hacking, albeit one that, having been previously unmentioned, cannot serve as our second example. Although now that we've brought it up…

It's not that *Silence of the Lambs* itself is particularly interesting or relevant. It's actually the only part of Thomas Harris's cycle of novels to be absent from Bryan Fuller's television adaptation, which is a murder-drenched dramatization of the entire literary style we've demonstrated thus far and the bit of plumage we're currently diving off the path towards. Its basic unit of interaction is the psychoanalytic dialogue, an exchange that never quite settles straightforwardly into a pattern of interrogation or debate or mutual exploration or parallel monologue, but instead twists and winds through all four. Consider this snippet, which interpolates a famous monologue from *Red Dragon*:

> **Hannibal:** Killing must feel good to God, too. He does it all the time, and are we not created in his image?
> **Will Graham:** Depends on who you ask.
> **Hannibal:** God's terrific. He dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshipers last Wednesday night in Texas, while they sang a hymn.
> **Will:** Did God feel good about that?
> **Hannibal:** He felt powerful.[96]

This exchange is most obviously interesting in how it navigates a relationship between abstract and material authority. God is simultaneously cast as a genuinely sovereign authority—a Platonic Form that man merely echoes—and as a brutal dictator capriciously executing people to assert his power. It comes wickedly close to satirizing and deconstructing the whole of Moldbug, and undoubtedly does so to Milton's God. The show does this

often, worrying the bone of authority and creation, refracting it over and over again through its Chesapeake Gothic hall of mirrors. Consider, for instance, this revisitation of the exchange two seasons later, this time between Will and an imagined interlocutor:

> **Abigail Hobbs:** Do you believe in God?
> **Will:** What I believe is closer to science fiction than anything in the Bible.
> **Abigail:** We all know it, but nobody ever says that G-dash-d won't do a G-dash-d-damn thing to answer anybody's prayers.
> **Will:** God can't save any of us because it's... inelegant. Elegance is more important than suffering. That's his design.
> **Abigail:** Are you talking about God or Hannibal?
> **Will:** Hannibal's not God. He wouldn't have any fun being God. Defying God, that's his idea of a good time. There's nothing he'd love more than to see this roof collapse mid-Mass, choirs singing... he would just love it, and he thinks God would love it, too.[97]

In the first exchange authority and power are at loggerheads; God's authority as creator seems necessarily legitimate, and yet he kills to feel powerful. Notably, he does not even kill for power, but rather for the feeling of power, this being strangely decoupled from its actual exertion. The second exchange, however, removes power from the equation. The suffering that exists is not there to make God feel good, but is an irrelevant by-product of an elegant design. The use of "design" is, within *Hannibal*, a catchphrase: Will utters it at the climactic moments of his psychological murder reconstructions, marking the moment when he has achieved understanding of the mind whose creation he observes. Notably, this means that Will is profiling God here, a fact that complicates any effort to read this exchange as a redemptive revision of the earlier one.

But the word "design" resonates in other ways for our purposes, implying creation and engineering. If the first exchange seemed to satirize Moldbug, this one seems even more so. It is, after all, the great one-liner critique of Mencius Moldbug: he's exactly what you'd expect to happen if you asked a software engineer to redesign political philosophy. And crucially, Moldbug basically agrees with it—he just also genuinely believes that the Silicon Valley "disruptor" crowd would be capable of running the world with no problems if only people would let them. Which in turn sheds light on the other part of the second exchange, Will's subsequent assessment of Hannibal's desire to defy God. Obviously this casts Hannibal in the role of Milton's Satan, and we'll pull that thread in a moment, but consider first the suggestion that God would enjoy Hannibal's defiance. This is an accusation of perversity, of course, and one Moldbug at least would furiously reject.

But the perversion is clearly there, in every flaring of edgelord rebelliousness Moldbug musters. It's what's at the heart of his jovially taunting

prose style—the genial condescension with which he addresses his imagined progressive reader. It's at the heart of the Silicon Valley genius CEO mystique, implicit in the word "disrupt" that Moldbug's ilk wear with such pride. It's the perversion that's always been at the heart of Milton's God. Of course he enjoys Satan's defiance. In fact, Satan's defiance is what enables him to enjoy anything at all.

Hannibal, however, poses a larger problem than Satan by dint of being a cannibalistic serial killer. It is not that this necessarily puts him in a significantly worse ethical bracket. Moldbug would obviously get very self-righteous about the violence involved, because he always does, but Hannibal's clearly got his number at this point, so who cares? Indeed, *Hannibal* reflects extensively on the issue, as in this trialogue:

> **Hannibal:** First and worst sign of sociopathic behavior, cruelty to animals.
> **Jack Crawford:** That doesn't apply in the kitchen.
> **Hannibal:** I have no taste for animal cruelty. That's why I employ an ethical butcher.
> **Bella Crawford:** An ethical butcher, be kind to animals and eat them?
> **Hannibal:** I'm afraid I insist on it, no need for unnecessary suffering. Human emotions are a gift from our animal ancestors. Cruelty is a gift humanity has given itself.
> **Jack:** A gift that keeps on giving.[98]

What this is is an invocation of Gnon. Land justifies Gnon's creation in terms of how it "permits a consensual acceptance of Natural Law, unobstructed by theological controversy."[99] Natural Law, of course, is just as much a philosophical gambit as God, and so this does not actually clarify anything, but that's never been the point of Gnon. The point of Gnon is that he is a god of harsh realities and uncomfortable truths—a Skulltopus sort of God fusing the repression of the hauntological with the indifference of the Weird. Among Gnon's creeds, more or less explicitly, is that violence will reassert itself, as will all the other brutal forms of disagreement that Universalism's pseudo-tolerance obscures.

Gnon is a constant factor in *Hannibal*, embodied by the carnal reality of Hannibal's murders, which are always counterpointed by the show's lushly trypophobic food design, emphasizing both Hannibal's refinement and the way in which his murders are a product of animalistic Natural Law—a simple consequence of the fact that he's a predator. And this is even explicitly juxtaposed with pragmatic law, as in this exchange between Hannibal and his psychiatrist:

> **Hannibal:** Almost anything can be trained to resist its instinct.
> **Bedelia Du Maurier:** A shepherd dog doesn't savage the sheep.
> **Hannibal:** But it wants to.[100]

But Gnon is counterbalanced by the basic camp of the entire endeavor. This is, after all, a television adaptation of Thomas Harris's gloriously lurid sex crime thrillers, although Fuller in some ways anchors his baroque psycho-philosophical meanderings by removing or de-emphasizing the sexual content of the crimes. But Mads Mikkelsen's Hannibal is still an over-the-top figure, from his outsized tastes and appetites to the deliciously bestial snarl that he contorts his face into when the mask of Hannibal's "person suit" slips. At times he appears in Will's extravagantly experimental hallucinations as a black stag with an impassively expressionless human face and vast antlers, the Wendigo. It's ridiculous.

And unlike the lingering threat of violence, camp has been in unfortunately short supply so far in this voyage. There are flashes of it in Land, including in "The Cult of Gnon," which ends with a parenthetical, "I need to take a quick break in order to sacrifice this goat… feel free to carry on chanting without me."[101] In particular, you can almost-fairly describe Nick Land's version of Moldbug as camp. But camp is largely absent from Moldbug and Yudkowsky, and it's a decided flaw in both of them—a significant part of why both are so easy for Land to parody.

And within *Hannibal*, camp is inextricable from the weird power Hannibal seems to wield. The show maintains an almost Todorovian ambiguity over whether Hannibal is in fact a supernatural entity or not, only depicted almost entirely in negative space. Nobody speculates out loud over whether Hannibal is an ordinary human or not. No mythological origin for him is ever even hinted at. And yet he is visibly inhuman—a monstrous something-else that is faster, deadlier, more charming and more clever, certainly more refined and elegant, than a man could hope to be. It is there in the unspoken alternative in Will and Abigail's discourse on God—that Hannibal is demonic. Indeed, it is central to Hannibal's ethics of eating: he rejects the label of "cannibal" because, as he explains to one of his victims, "It's only cannibalism if we're equals."[102] And by virtue of his successful hunting of them, they are necessarily not equals.

This reflects a key concept of Moldbug—one established in the very first post on *Unqualified Reservations*, when he proposes a simple plan of action, which he calls formalism: "Let's figure out exactly who has what, now, and give them a little fancy certificate. Let's not get into who should have what."[103] And from this assign absolute sovereignty to those with power, a simple reification of the pragmatic reality of things. It's shockingly materialist for Moldbug, although obviously the particulars of "figure out exactly who has what, now,

and give them a little fancy certificate" are a fairly stark horizon for that line of thought. Still, for Moldbug power self-justifies—his one concession to Gnon, deep and fundamental enough to suffice.

But there is another key concept that Hannibal embodies here, albeit one that is not quite in Moldbug. One of Moldbug's most fundamental debts is to the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle. His essay "Why Carlyle matters" opens by proclaiming him the "one writer in English whose name can be uttered with Shakespeare's," which is of course a standard gambit when you're upselling a second-rate stylist. Moldbug unpacks a bunch of key concepts in Carlyle—his misanthropic view of history, for instance, and his notion of slavery, which is the occasion for Moldbug's infamous declaration that "the innate character and intelligence of some is more suited to mastery than slavery. For others, it is more suited to slavery," and further that 17th century Spaniards "found that Africans tended to make good slaves," a fact that "is most parsimoniously explained by genetic differences," from which he transitions into talking about how a good slave is "loyal, patient, and not exceptionally bright."[104] Another Carlyle essay—"From Mises to Carlyle: my sick journey to the dark side of the force"—uses Carlyle to lay out his Manichean order/chaos dualism in its starkest and most direct terms. "To a Carlylean," he says, having identified himself as one, "the main event is the struggle between left and right. Which is the struggle between good and evil. Which is the struggle between order and chaos. Evil is chaos; good is order. Evil is left; good is right. Evil is fiction; good is truth. Gentlemen, there is no other road! The facts, it's true, are stones between our teeth. Shall we chew these stones? If not now, when?"[105]

And yet puzzlingly, the idea for which Thomas Carlyle is best-known is almost entirely absent from Moldbug's work. Carlyle is most associated with the great man theory of history—a view that Kleio's tale is shaped primarily by heroes, who, in Carlyle's worldview, become almost superhuman figures, taking hold of the world and steering it with the aid of divine inspiration. Moldbug dances around this, and not just because of the theism, but it's clearly there, tacitly underpinning his mythologizing of the sovereign. Indeed, one of his few explicit acknowledgments of this aspect of Carlyle comes in a post where he offers a lengthy excerpt from *Heroes and Hero-Worship* to commemorate the death of Steve Jobs, who, recall, he'd pitched as his top choice for king.[106] And he concludes the *Gentle Introduction* with a stirring speech that actually culminates in an invocation of Kleio, but that begins, "Above all, then, the Reaction depends on one question. Will good people

undertake it? No—will *great* people undertake it? If so, it will happen, and I think succeed. The most important thing about this entire project: at every step, in every thing it does, it must attract the *best*."[107] So for despite his silence on the matter, it is clear that the Great Man is as central to Moldbug as Marx is.

This actually sets up an intriguing bit of tension between Moldbug and Land, who has advocated for a schism between neoreaction (his preferred faction) and what he calls Heroic Reaction, a political variation of it that seeks a commander-leader, and that he tacitly accuses the bulk of the alt-right of pursuing. Highlighting the perversity, Land proclaims "Moldbug is over-rated" to be Heroic Reaction's first tenet.[108] But while Land rejects the lure of the Heroic, both Moldbug and Yudkowsky are seduced.

But let's be clear about how Hannibal embodies this concept, because it might not be the most obvious way. The temptation is of course to declare him a parodic inversion of the Great Man—the Villain of history. This is not a notion that arises in Carlyle, however. And while one can regard this as an oversight, the alternative explanation is also compelling: there is no such thing as a Villain of history. Hannibal is in fact the Great Man himself. This fits; the European aristocrat is part and parcel of who Hannibal is, which is why his two best incarnations were played by non-Americans. Harris dapples his origin with the same terrors of the twentieth century that Moldbug loves to pick over in showing how America is a communist country. And indeed with a moment's thought this becomes obvious: for all Carlyle might rail against democracy, he'd be a fool if he tried to deny that the Whigs had shaped history. Indeed, in what must surely be one of the most biting moments of Carlyle for Moldbug, he even treats Cromwell as an example of the Hero as King in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. And as Moldbug points out, the Devil was the first Whig. Of course he's a Great Man.

Is this our solution, then? Embrace the Defier, Hannibal Lecter as Kleio's Champion, the Great Hero of History, and ride out into glorious battle with the end of days? It's tempting. Certainly neither Yudkowsky nor Moldbug offer anything that would stand up to Hannibalism. Land is a trickier business —his insistence that "pleasure is not an end, but a tool"[109] in the course of his rejection of utilitarian ethics is an effective weapon against the "no ethics, only aesthetics"[110] stylings that make Hannibal so compelling. Equally, on strictly Gnon-level concerns, the experienced serial killer is probably a safer bet than the speed-addict philosopher. Alas, this is also the bridge too far; cannibalistic

murders ultimately don't pass the philosophical sniff test. And in any case, the whole being fictional thing introduces complications outside the scope of this work.

V.

"I am not man so much as syndrome; as a voice that bellows in the human heart. I am a rain. I cannot be contained. Free of Life, how then shall I be shackled? Free of Time, how then shall History be my cage? I am a wave, an influence. Who then shall be made safe from me?"—Alan Moore, *From Hell*

That's not to say that fiction doesn't have utility to us. As I said, the textual hacking phenomenon acquits itself well in fiction, and the psychoanalytic jousting of *Hannibal* is not the only example of it we've seen so far. Indeed, it's probably fairest to classify the AI-Box Experiment as fictional, since it fits neatly into a classic science fiction tradition of such tales. (Consider Alex Garland's 2015 film *Ex Machina* in particular, as it's basically a dramatization of Yudkowsky's experiment.) And in fact the second example of textual hacking to have been mapped so far in our little eschatological excursion is also fictional: the temptation of Eve in *Paradise Lost*.

Unlike the AI-Box Experiment, the transcript of this one exists, but even before we get to it there are some very important conclusions to draw. First of all, this provides a significant new word to describe textual hacking, namely "temptation." And indeed, given the specific story of Adam and Eve, "seduction" is appropriate. This is the sort of game for which sex is a metaphor. Second of all, and perhaps most astonishingly, we're thirty thousand words into this book and we still haven't had a woman in it who isn't fictional.[111] Third of all, if we're looking for examples of "temptation" and "seduction" it says something that we couldn't actually find any within neoreaction itself.

But if we read the temptation of Eve as a version of the AI-Box Experiment one of the first things we notice is that it's a near-perfect model for how one imagines a neoreactionary would play. Which is to say, Satan opens by negging Eve, accusing her of looking at him "with disdain, Displeas'd that I approach thee thus, and gaze Insatiate, I thus single, nor have feard Thy awful brow,"[112] which may be the earliest instance of telling someone they have resting bitch face. Unfortunately this attitude is not accidental, with *Paradise Lost* making the unequivocal claim that the fall of man was because bitches ain't shit. But while Milton is pretty clear that Eve fucks

up because she's a woman, that doesn't mean he has her go down in such a substanceless way. He ultimately persuades Eve via "perswasive words, impregn'd With Reason, to her seeming, and with Truth."[113] And his argument is made over the course of about fifty lines, and is theologically sophisticated, suggesting that even though eating the fruit would represent a defiance of God, He would ultimately praise Eve's "dauntless vertue, whom the pain Of Death denounc't, whatever thing Death be, Deterrd not from achieving what might leade To happier life, knowledge of Good and Evil." [114]

Ultimately, Satan's argument hinges on the vast power that Knowledge offers. On the one hand, this is another depressing bit of sexism, as it's presented as appealing to Eve's womanly vanity. But on the other it speaks to the parallelism that's at the heart of *Paradise Lost*'s larger project. The temptation of Eve is of course one half of the Fall of Man, which is itself parallel to Satan's Fall, which is, depending on how you count, either three or four iterations of the same basic event—a textual pwnage, as it were. But two of these iterations—Adam's decision to eat the fruit of Knowledge and Satan's Fall—have an interesting characteristic relevant to our larger project, which is that they are not presented as dialogues. And since we are dealing with puppets of Moldbug, Yudkowsky, and Land (along with supporting players) as opposed to engaging in some sort of debate with the men themselves (ew), this is the specific sort of textual hacking we most care about. Whatever intellectual position Satan represents, this notion of power is how Milton pwns it.

You can probably see where this is going. "Whatever intellectual position Satan represents" is not an unknown quantity. We answered that one already: he's a parody of reaction, neo or otherwise, and a figure with deep-rooted similarities to both Moldbug and Land. But let's be precise about what Milton's pwnage here really means, because it's also Milton's pwnage in the same sense that Moldbug talks about Dawkins' pwnage. The "of the devil's party" quip cuts both ways; Milton fatally undermines his own liberal ideology at the same time that he pwns Moldbug's. But whoever the target is, it's indisputable who's doing the pwning: the Cathedral.

Which brings us back to our long-postponed question of what actually happened to Dawkins. The answer, as we noted, is clearly not that he got pwned in any individually targeted sense. But remember, Moldbug's basic point about him—that he's a Christian atheist—is absolutely correct. Even Dawkins, who is, let's be clear, actually worse than Moldbug at this whole "philosophy" thing, recognizes that he's a Christian atheist. So Moldbug's basic

question—how do you set up a memeplex that is so well-entrenched that even someone who is inclined to adopt unpopular and heretical labels like "atheist" and write books with obviously trolling titles like *The God Delusion* doesn't question its basic tenets?

For all that he uselessly conflates that with the question of pwnage, Moldbug manages some correct answers here. He correctly identifies, for instance, the importance of parental and educational transmission to ideological hegemony. But as noted, he confuses transmission with persistence. And when he gets to persistence he largely misses the point, talking about things like euphoria, anesthesia, and ovinization. But eventually, improbably, he circles back around to something useful, namely the idea of counterimmunity, suggesting the establishment of a "neutered false opposition" whereby a sort of official heresy is introduced as a bogeyman. It's almost right, but he's missing the forest for the trees. The use of the false opposition isn't, as he suggests, so that "heretical memes are contained… where we can see them—under control."[115] It's to render real opposition unthinkable. The point isn't to put heretical memes where we can see them—it's to set up a false choice that renders them invisible.

But the overall point is that the Cathedral works through fundamental premises and deep social structures. It is what is taught so early and reinforced so constantly that it's hard to even notice it. It's made up of the sorts of things that one doesn't even state as premises because they're too obvious. The more inescapably basic the better. Moldbug does well to spot "democracy is a good idea" as one that doesn't come up very often when people discuss this, but it and "racism is bad" are the only two he's able to find, and he seemingly just assumes that if one's wrong the other one must be too. (It's unclear which one comes first for him.)

Milton, however, finds a stunner. The key moment comes in Satan's argument to Eve, when he argues that by the power offered by Knowledge "ye shall be as Gods, Knowing both Good and Evil as they know," and asks "what are Gods that Man may not become?"[116] Crucially, this is framed in terms of Good—Satan argues that knowledge of Good and Evil will make doing Good easier, and that this knowledge is how God's goodness is attained, such that defiance of God is actually a means of drawing closer to him. It's obviously a flawed argument—that's Milton's point after all. But it's got a compelling move at its heart, which is the way in which it uses the desire for holiness to create sin.

This basic device is one identified by Stanley Fish, more or less the greatest Milton scholar of the 20th century and also more or less a poster child for everything Moldbug hates, in that he's a progressive career academic climber who, over the course of his career, went from Milton scholar to university administrator to holding down a sinecure position at Florida International University's law school nominally teaching constitutional law despite having no training whatsoever to this effect. And he's a postmodernist to boot. But for all of that (and I should confess, I studied under Fish for a semester, and also fiddled the margins and kerning to make the page length on my final paper, which he did not notice), his early career work on Milton, a book called *Surprised by Sin,* is one of the most startlingly precise and clever close-readings ever penned.

Fish's argument is that Milton's prose uses this basic structure over and over again, leading the reader down a train of thought and then, as the title suggests, surprising them by having that line of thought turn sinful, thus enacting their own Fall over and over again in the book on a sentence-to-sentence level. And in his later work he refined the reading, arguing that Milton's work is in fact situated against poetic beauty itself, shunning the very idea of art's power as a horrifying rejection of God's absolute and divine truth.[117] But the real endpoint of this—and a point that's implicit in Fish's larger work—is that Milton makes his basilisks emerge from the basic properties of language. Metaphor and poetic technique, by appealing to ambiguity and imprecision, are fundamental affronts to the pure and absolute truth of God, and Milton's work is about re-enacting that inadequacy in praise of God.[118]

Milton doesn't quite present it this way, but it's close. Consider God's explanation of how he gave mankind free will so that they could freely choose obedience to him. If sin is separation from God, though, this free will is itself a form of sin. And God all but says this, emphasizing the fact that he created them with the freedom to fall. Read this way, the very act of speaking is a declaration of rebellion—to even utter the word "I" is to identify one's self as a subject separate from God, fallen and in sin. This is, in the end, the entire point of Satan's damnation due to ego, and to the fact that it is pride and egotism that serve as Eve's weakness: it is the very fact that they are individuals that damns them. And so every time they speak and assert themselves to be so they talk themselves into trouble.

This may not seem like a huge problem for Moldbug, who, after all, rejects the theological God who underpins Milton's little trap. But in this instance he's

hoisted upon his own petard; like Dawkins, he's retained too much of the underlying structure for rejecting the metaphysics to make any difference. Moldbug may not believe in the all-knowing atemporal creator God, but he believes in the existence of the inherent and indisputable authority God represents. And the problem of language as sin thus still applies: to speak is to violate the doctrine of passivism and rebel against authority. The submission to authority that Moldbug craves—"I set myself to the problem of *finding a good King*," as he memorably proclaims at one point, weirdly ecstatic italics his —is precisely what a red pill merchant like himself can never offer.[119]

But Land isn't going to yield so easily. (Hell, even Yudkowsky requires more than Stanley Fish's reading of Milton to comprehensively dismantle.) His project is not in the least bit utopian, and the notion of intrinsic rightness is not so much absent from his thought as largely irrelevant to it. Certainly he's no stranger to postmodernist conceptions of language; they were a primary subject of his early academic work, which followed in the same Burroughs "language is a virus" tradition as cyberpunk. That's the entire point of essays like "A zIIgōthIc-==X=cōDA==-(CōōkIng-lōbsteRs-wIth-jAke-AnD-DInōs)" (excerpt: "AusChwItz-Is-AlphAbet—euRōpe-fuCkfACe—AlChemICAl=tRAnsubstAntIatIōn—AnD—metRōpōlIs—+——+——AusChwItz-Is-the-futuRe").[120] His stated mission was to "hack the Human Security System," by which he meant the basic parameters of human consciousness. And so the suggestion that language itself is a tool of the Cathedral would hardly bother him. That's more or less his point. I mean, we're talking about a guy whose endgame is "and then the rich elites evolve face tentacles." (Tentacle is the new cannibal.) The point isn't the retention of human civilization and its trappings. Humanity is just the prison that capitalism might escape from.

Still, we've at least clarified our problem a little. Note that both Milton's trap and our takedown of Moldbug hinge on a similar moment—one where the author sets up an absolute, inescapable either/or. In Milton, either you submit to God or you sin by separating yourself. In Moldbug, either you support order and thus the inherent legitimacy of authority, or you are an evil, chaotic dissenter. Moments like this are ripe for hacks, Satanic inversions, and other such tomfooleries. Unsurprisingly—they are moments where a thinker is going to behave in relatively predictable ways. If you can reduce a question to a matter of order versus chaos, Moldbug's position is inevitable. If you can

reduce one to sin or obedience to God, so is Milton's. And it's usually pretty easy to do something tricksy with a binary opposition. You either find a third way, take the one the author didn't take, or show that the choice is an illusion. So let's look for such a moment in Land.

The obvious choice is the Great Filter. It is, after all, the ultimate in binary oppositions, which is why Land positions it as the ur-Horror in the first place —the great cosmic matter of life or death. And it's ultimately the backstop his entire face tentacles ending hinges on. Survival either requires tribal loyalties and large piles of guns or it requires capitalist acceleration towards the bionic horizon. In one option we enjoy a slow extinction at the hands of the Malthusian limits of our planet. In the other we become something monstrous and unthinkable, that being the only sort of thing that can possibly make it through the Great Filter.

The trouble is, Land's already anticipated all the usual tricks. We can't take the option he doesn't take because he's coy about which one he actually favors or believes possible. Indeed, in one blog post he explicitly sets up the dualism between "ultra-capitalism or a return to monkey business" while ostentatiously declining to commit to one or the other for "occult strategic considerations."[121] Because, of course, the trick is that he's gotten both of them to follow from Moldbug. Nor can we really take a third way. The Great Filter is, as noted, as absolute a binary as they come.

Denying the choice offers some promise, and of course there's much to pick at in his specific tactical assessments of the best options for either case. For instance, we might argue that maximizing the amount of time we are alive as a species is best performed by people other than white nationalists, or that capitalism's inability to adequately consider ecological catastrophe renders it unfit for the purpose of bringing about a posthuman future. But the truth is that on both points it's hard to confidently declare that Land is wrong. In the face of an ecologically brutal planet, the guys with guns and tribal loyalties are a depressingly compelling bet to stick around. And the idea that the posthuman would leave the merely human behind to die is an irreducible risk to the very idea of the posthuman, as Yudkowsky would ultimately point out. You can argue that he might be wrong—but good luck getting rid of the itching, creeping dread that it might be you instead. Which leaves only denying the Filter's existence. And to be fair, there are plenty of other explanations for the Fermi Paradox available, so you can absolutely do that. We, unfortunately, cannot—because we began this book with the sentence, "Let us assume that we are fucked."

We can, of course, simply move on to trying a different vulnerability, and there is one that we can distill out of the hauntological/Weird trick we're going to use to get into his system in the first place. But at this point that would be dishonest. We walked into this little trap, after all. This is the fight we came here to have. If our pwnage of Land doesn't address the Great Filter then it doesn't really address Land.

The bit of Land that's sticking, ultimately, is that unlike Milton and Moldbug he's a philosophical pessimist and a nihilist, meticulously keeping his potentially subvertable positive investments to a bare minimum. So let's have a look at another nihilist. Unfortunately, we don't have one in our repertoire of philosophical puppets, although Thacker is pretty close. But if we want to figure out how to launch exploits on a nihilist, we probably want to go to the extreme. And there is nobody who has articulated a more deeply nihilistic position than Thomas Ligotti.

Ligotti is an interesting figure. For most of his literary career he was a horror writer who toiled in obscurity save for among other horror writers, where his reputation was that of a genius. His style was firmly in the weird fiction tradition that can broadly be defined as "writers who appear on lists that begin with H.P. Lovecraft," but, as he does with most things, he occupied an extreme end of this, transforming his own debilitating anxiety and anhedonia into stories of unsettling dream logic in which it is never quite clear what the object of horror even is, despite the stories being unequivocally terrifying. But in 2011 he broke from fiction to publish a non-academic work of philosophy entitled *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*.

He is also tangentially but undeniably connected with our little nexus of writers. *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* bears a brief introduction by Ray Brassier, who also co-edited *Fanged Noumena*, the main collection of Land's writings. And while politically Ligotti is a socialist (although what precisely that means given his belief that the ideal world would be one in which humanity had no more than animal consciousness is complex), he's also recorded music with neo-folk band Current 93, whose relationship with white nationalism requires one to ask questions like "is there such a thing as a good use of the swastika post-1933?" (and they're the nice end of neo-folk). Moreover, between his surprisingly large popular influence (Matthew McConaughey's character in *True Detective* directly pastiches *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*) and the sheer absolutism of his philosophical pessimism, he serves as a useful place to do some test sketches of what productive responses to nihilism might look like.

The Conspiracy Against the Human Race is a tricky book. In terms of structure and content it is a work of philosophy, but it eschews the sort of rigor typical of the genre. Instead it seeks to craft what might be described as a credible view—a position worth taking seriously. In this regard its subtitle, "A Contrivance of Horror," is apropos, and the book must firmly be taken in the same spirit as Ligotti's fiction. Its purpose is to sketch an unsettling and awful possibility, and to allow this possibility to linger in the mind of its reader.

As Thacker notes, every philosopher begins by rejecting a commonly held article of truth, and Ligotti's is a whopper: the idea that, as he puts it, "being alive is all right." In his view, consciousness is an evolutionary misstep best corrected by voluntary extinction. His central problem with consciousness is not unlike the one of language that Fish identifies in Milton: it can't actually do its job. Just as language transgresses against God by asserting itself, consciousness exists in constant and anxious opposition to the knowledge of its own inevitable death. To be conscious of one's existence is to have all of the biological impulses for survival common to life but to be aware that these impulses are doomed.

Crucially, this is not a position about the primacy of nature—a claim that the world would be better off without us. Ligotti's position towards nature is one of unabashed fury—complete and utter outrage that it would ever generate something as crushingly pointless as consciousness. In his view, "Once we settle ourselves off-world, we can blow up this planet from outer space. It's the only way to be sure its stench will not follow us." Ligotti's position is not anti-humanist, but rather anti-existence. In his view, nothing is self-justifying, and thus everything is in the end, as he repeatedly puts it, "malignantly useless."

As philosophical moves go, it is one of unsettling efficacy. Few indeed are the positions it cannot cut down, as Ligotti demonstrates with repeated and casual wit throughout the book. We might imagine, for instance, the swiftness with which it would dismantle the Miltonian position simply by blinking uncomprehendingly as soon as Milton begins to speak (and thus to sin) and asking "Why are you doing that?" to which there is no possible response that Milton could ever give. His famed task of justifying the ways of God to men is, by definition, a claim that God's decision to cast man out and demand that man return of his own free will appears unjustifiable, not least because it blatantly is. And Ligottian reasoning can similarly dismantle Moldbug, whose proclamation that "Evil is chaos; good is order" runs immediately into the problem that a temporally bounded world in which things constantly change

(i.e. the one we live in) must therefore be an inherently evil one in which his desire for order is as contemptible as it is doomed.

The problem, such as it is, is that it's a scorched-earth tactic. Sure, you can dispatch inept authoritarians with glee, but no alternatives stand up any better to your newfound philosophical weaponry, including, ultimately, Ligotti's own, a point he's well aware of and keen to point out repeatedly. As he observes in the book's denouement, "Being somebody is rough, but being nobody is out of the question." The pessimistic position he offers comes to no useful conclusion either. "What do we care about the horror of being insufferably aware we are alive and will die?" he asks. "We are staying put, but you can go extinct if you like." In other words, go ahead and declare that Ligotti wins; you still don't.

But let's try to take a snapshot of the Ligottian critique as it autodestructs. The issue, at the end of the day, is that we don't want to die; that's always the issue with Ligotti. Being nobody, after all, is only out of the question because of our basic certainty that we're going to eventually be just that. It's not that we can't be nobody—it's that we don't want to be, or, rather, because we want not to be. Which is to say that at the final flickering instant of his line of thought, Thomas Ligotti does the only thing he possibly can do: he makes an affirmative commitment, just like he said he would all along.

But wait a moment—that's not the only affirmative commitment he's made! He also really wants to blow up the planet, for instance. Crucially, though, this is instrumental towards a larger goal—a desire for justice in the face of the monstrous concoction that is consciousness. Elsewhere, he expresses the idea that this would be a sort of mercy, saying that "to push that button, to depopulate the earth and arrest its rotation as well—what satisfaction, as of a job prettily done. This would be for the good of all, for even those who know nothing about the conspiracy against the human race are among its injured parties."

Unsettlingly, this line of thought jibes with the Ligottian refutations of Milton and Moldbug as well. If God's actions are unjustifiable, best undo them. If chaos is the real good and order the real evil, best destroy it all. But some caveats have to be put in place here. For one thing, the "we don't want to die" problem flares up. Which is to say that Moldbug still has a point—even if we make the ultimate formalist analysis of power and declare that nature's genocidal vendetta against humanity and willingness to, if it comes to it, turn the sun into a red giant and incinerate the earth means that chaos is the true good, we can't actually short-circuit the innate sense that cleanliness is more desirable than messiness. We must also recognize that Ligotti's position is on a

very fundamental level anti-suffering. His central image is one of a quiet, orderly cessation of business. His desire is not to go through the terrifying agony of death, but to simply be unalive. Which is to say that pushing a button and ending it all in a swift and fiery cataclysm is fine, whereas the slow attrition of the human population due to a succession of wars and famines is less so.

Already, then, it becomes possible to clarify the specific issue we are having with Nick Land. Ligotti even describes something very much like the Great Filter in the final paragraph of *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, writing, "There will come a day for each of us—and then for all of us—when the future will be done with. Until then, humanity will acclimate itself to every new horror that comes knocking, as it has done from the very beginning. It will go on and on until it stops. And the horror will go on, with generations falling into the future like so many bodies into open graves." But for Ligotti, unlike Land, it matters how we go.

Ultimately this is the biggest flaw in Land and his entire accelerationist project: none of the ends that he points towards are satisfying ones. Perhaps, as he suggests in some of his more recent work, "The 'monster' (Vauung) is the war. It feeds upon escalation, zigzagging between antagonists, to extinguish any inclinations towards peace,"[122] (note that Vauung is both the name he gave his shattered self in "A Dirty Joke" and, as he says in the same blogpost that quote is from, Kabbalistically related to the word for "language," as well as the medium of Twitter) and his grim assessment that the neoreactionaries are your best bet for survival in that case is entirely accurate. But even if he is, quite bluntly, we ought begin exploring other ways to go, positioning ourselves on the railroad tracks so that the onrushing Great Filter will kill us as quickly and painlessly as possible. (I'd assume bioterrorism is the best approach, personally; it seems the perfect mixture of killing everybody, relative painlessness, and being achievable by as close to an individual actor as possible.)

Actually, it's worth noting that Ligotti, just before he proposes his would-be extinctionist vision, discusses at length the idea of Terror Management Theory, a school of psychology that suggests that most human behavior is motivated by a fear of death (certainly a fair read on Yudkowsky, whose fear of death is so pathological and absolute that he refers to not signing up for cryonics—a process that is both expensive and, scientifically speaking, utter bullshit—as "deathism"[123]), specifically suggesting that, as Ligotti summarizes it, "In lieu of personal immortality, we are willing to accept the survival of persons and institutions that we regard as extensions of us—*our* families, *our*,

heroes, *our* religions, *our* countries," which leads inexorably towards an attitude of "genocide against outsiders who impinge upon them and *their* world" in order to preserve this desired future. Ligotti notes wryly that "promulgators of TMT believe that a universal dispersion of their ideas will make people more tolerant of the alien worldviews of others and not kill them," observing that "this is just another worldview that brandishes itself as the best worldview in the world." Although Ligotti is not actively talking about neoreaction here, most of the argument ports over fairly neatly. The description of what we substitute for personal immortality is, ultimately, exactly the sort of tribalism that makes up Land and Moldbug's racism; his mockery of TMT's solution of bland tolerance is scarcely different from their critique of liberal democracy. The Ligottian terrorist, in other words, is Ligotti's intended response to people like Land.

But Land's overall apparatus can survive the loss of neoreaction relatively unscathed, and the terrorist is hardly Ligotti's overall stopping point either. Controlled demolition is a reasonable aspiration, but various circumstances put it out of reach, not least that the overwhelming majority of us are never going to find our fingers upon a button with which we can tidily and satisfyingly mothball the entire planet. As Ligotti observes, the odds are overwhelming that the future is going to happen.

No, Ligotti's endpoint is something altogether subtler and stranger, and it is one that emphasizes how little *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* differs from his other work: that the experience of consciousness is one of horror. And so he ends, inevitably, with a discussion of the supernatural; not the utopian supernatural of God or Friendly AI (which he rejects with a swipe akin to Roko's Basilisk—the suggestion that "the ideal being standing at the end of evolution may deduce that the best of all possible worlds is useless, if not malignant, and that the self-extinction of our future selves would be the optimal course to take") but the supernatural as the thing we think should not be. As he puts it, "Everywhere around us are natural habitats, but within us is the shiver of startling and dreadful things. Simply put: *We are not from here*." We are ourselves the supernatural, and to the supernatural horror of death we shall return.

There's a way out here, and it's an obvious one if you're a Thomas Ligotti fan, which is to start enjoying horror. And while Ligotti is clear that there's no way to accomplish this once and for all, he's equally clear that we find an endless succession of ways to more or less fake it well enough to get by. But as understood by Ligotti—which is to say in terms of contact with the outside—it's actually a bit of a problem for Land. Ligotti ultimately creates a fairly

robust coping mechanism, if only by implication. If we are from "out there" but terrified to actually return, we can at least invite more of the outside in to join us. As Ligotti puts it, "Leashed to the supernatural, we know its signs and try to tame them by desensitization and lampoonery. We study them as symbols, play games with them." It's a crude stalling mechanism, but so is everything. At least it gives us our much-needed next thing to do.

But for Land there is the inescapable problem of his madness. He actively sought contact with the outside, and broke himself doing so. Now he recoils at its touch. "Don't ask for a sign," he writes in *Phyl-Undhu*. "You have a billion signs a minute that you don't want. You're already in The Flood." There's too much outside, in other words. It's everywhere; it's breaking in. We need some respite from it. And from this to the Cracker Factory, whose "function is to block off all the exits," and thus to racial tribalism.

At this point we have all the pieces we need for our attack on Land. Recall, after all, what our insertion point was: his failure to recognize the interchangeability of the hauntological and the Weird. Which Miéville defined, in effect, in terms of whether the monstrosity comes from inside or outside. So Land is caught in a troubling bind. He's fascinated by the Weird because it comes from the outside, but he ultimately has to reject it for exactly that reason. But anything you could import from the Weird can just as easily come in through the hauntological. And so as a defense, Land's line against the outside is, as Ligotti would put it, malignantly useless.

What happens if we draw the line in the opposite position, though? That is to say, what if we take a line against the inside in the same way Land adamantly refuses the outside's offer post-madness? At first blush it is difficult even to imagine what this would mean. Rejecting the outside seems intuitive, but rejecting the inside seems an impossibility—as though one is rejecting the very idea of identity. But if we're not from here, what good can the inside possibly be? As Ligotti aptly demonstrates, an uncompromising line against interiority is manifestly possible.

In an odd way, Land gives us the perfect description of this necessary alternative when he's describing white nationalist identity and says that "because 'whiteness' is a limit (pure absence of color), it slips smoothly from the biological factuality of the Caucasian sub-species into metaphysical and mystical ideas. Rather than accumulating genetic variation, a white race is contaminated or polluted by admixtures that compromise its defining negativity—to darken it is to destroy it."[124] Such a creature as this is uniquely capable of drawing a line against the inside for the precise reason that there is

no inside—its identity is a pure absence and negativity. The line, in other words, is drawn already.

Land describes this identity as "besieged," and it's hard not to think of his coinage of The Flood here—the billion unwanted signals swarming in from the outside. But if The Flood is useless, at least it doesn't seem malignantly so: its problem is merely one of insufficiency. The inside is useless because it's empty, but the outside is useless because it's infinite. Sure, there are a billion unwanted signals, but that's still not all of the possible signals. There could always still be something else out there.[125] So if we cannot take advantage the right to exit, and both Ligotti and Land are very clear on the fact that we can't, we might yet be able to salvage the right to be invaded.[126]

On a basic level, this is nothing more than a straightforward inversion. All I'm doing is taking the white nationalist monster that Land describes and embracing what it hates. And let's be clear, it would scarcely be possible to come up with a notion more loathsome to this particular breed of reactionary shithead than the right to be invaded. It's a pathological terror within the neoreactionary community, exemplified by things like their bizarre obsession with the idea of cuckolding, including the formulation of the word "cuckservative" to describe supposedly conservative politicians who were weak on immigration and thus allowing the nation's gene pool to be cuckolded. No, seriously, that's a thing.

More than just embracing what white nationalism hates, clearly, I'm embracing what it fears. Because, after all, it is blatantly the sense of being under siege that Land ascribes to white nationalism—a constant fear. What Land is doing is taking his own post-madness terror of the outside and finding the element within western democracy that shares it, then presenting that as a terrifying monster. And fair enough: he's not entirely wrong. White nationalists are scary. But why?

Let's get the obvious possibility out of the way. It's not because they're right in some fundamental sense. Land's "biological factuality of the Caucasian sub-species" is nothing of the sort; its non-existence is as settled science as the anthropocene extinction. More broadly, the entire idea of scientific racism (and neoreactionaries, with their deep ties to the technolibertarian/"rationalist" tradition, are deeply "scientific" in their racism, with "human biodiversity" being their current code word of choice[127]) is a preposterous house of cards consisting of people desperately trying to bludgeon science back into supporting discredited Victorian ideas about why black people are inherently less intelligent than white people. This ends up

being a sort of Goldilocks-style farce in which various scientific definitions of "race" are tried on only to, without exception, either divide populations too finely to actually make the desired generalizations or to create categories so broad as to be genetically meaningless. Race, as employed in the colloquial sense, is a clumsy attempt to classify people based on general patterns of physical appearance (most notably melanin levels) correlating to geographic distribution during the period where Europe was mapping/conquering the world.

It is not that there is no relationship between geographic ancestry and genetic makeup—the Wikipedia article you're looking for is "Human Y-chromosome DNA haplogroup"—but the genetic differences across haplogroups are of negligible significance in any direct "some people are inherently less intelligent" sense even before you even get to the massive eyebrow raise that is the statement "intelligence is accurately measured by IQ tests," upon which most of these claims depend. In practice any correlations emerging from haplogroups are dwarfed by those emerging from environmental factors such as lead exposure, childhood nutrition, and economic development. (For a sense of how useless the claims of scientific racism are, the supposed couple point IQ difference that exists between black and white people is vastly smaller than the IQ difference between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland in the 1970s.[128] Even Moldbug ultimately admits this is a load of crap, and he thinks black people make good slaves.)

In other words, the "metaphysical and mystical ideas" of whiteness that Land mentions is literally the whole of the issue. Or, to put it in the near-universally agreed upon terms of sociology, race is a social construct. This is not, as neoreactionaries would immediately have it, to say that race does not exist. Rather it's to say that race is a phenomenon that occurs in society, not a genetic phenomenon. Indeed, the example Land weirdly obsesses upon in *The Dark Enlightenment*, the shooting of Trayvon Martin, is indicative. Land writes at some length about the sense of awkwardness that much of the media (he calls it the Cathedral, of course) had when instead of being "a hulking, pasty-faced, storm-trooper look-alike, hopefully some kind of Christian gun-nut, and maybe—if they really hit pay-dirt—a militia movement type with a history of homophobia and anti-abortion activism," George Zimmerman turned out to be "a 'white Hispanic' (a category that seems to have been rapidly innovated on the spot)" until his identity "gradually shifted through a series of ever more reality-compliant ethnic complications." And he's right that Zimmerman's ethnicity was misreported in some of the early stories on the shooting, and

that Zimmerman was not some, as Land puts it, "great Amerikkkan defendant."

Unfortunately, Land is almost completely talking out of his ass about the details. This isn't surprising; Land's a Brit who lives in China, and his sense of the nuances of American racial politics seems to come from watching television. But the error he makes is profoundly revealing. At the heart of it is Land's crack about "white Hispanic" identity, which had in reality been reflected on the US Census since 2000 by the decision to decouple race and ethnicity, allowing people to identify separately as "white or black" and "Hispanic or not Hispanic." This, in turn, reflects the fact that many Hispanic countries have their own distinctions between "black" and "white," and, more broadly, the fact that race is actually really fucking complicated. Zimmerman was the child of a white guy of Germanic descent (hence the surname) and a Peruvian immigrant who had an Afro-Peruvian (which is to say black) grandmother. Between his name and complexion he could safely be described as "white-passing," which is to say that if he didn't want people to instinctively identify him as Hispanic he was generally capable of ensuring that. Trayvon Martin, on the other hand, was named "Trayvon" and never went a moment of his life without being identified as black. Or, to put it another way—and this was the actual issue that pushed Martin's death into the news—if a black teenager had shot a white guy named George Zimmerman on the street he'd have been arrested without question, "stand your ground" laws or not, and everyone knew it. And in that event, the detail that Zimmerman was "actually Hispanic and technically black in the one-drop sense" would never have come up because a black teenager getting arrested doesn't go beyond the local news. Except, of course, you can't shoot someone with a bag of Skittles.

The strangely stuttering tone with which the media handled this (relatively simple) story about race and violence was not, in other words, evidence of some underlying incoherence in the narrative that most people instinctively saw in the story, but a misguided concession to the factually wrong idea of "scientific" race that Land is trying to give credit to. In other words, it's only because racist assholes who not only thought it was no big deal that some black kid got shot for being uppity but were outraged that anyone might think otherwise decided to claim that "it wasn't even because he was black because neither was Zimmerman" that the meaningless detail of George Zimmerman, in addition to having a Haplogroup R1b father, having a mother of Haplogroup C and a direct ancestor of Haplogroup E came to be discussed on the national news in the scientifically imprecise terms of "blackness" and "whiteness" in the first place.

And this is, in a nutshell, what's scary about white nationalists—a fear eloquently articulated by Land's heroic racist John Derbyshire, whom he quotes in the epigraph to Part 4a as saying, "My own sense of the thing is that underneath the happy talk, underneath the dogged adherence to failed ideas and dead theories, underneath the shrieking and anathematizing at people like me, there is a deep and cold despair. In our innermost hearts, we don't believe racial harmony can be attained."[129] And it's true—the possibility that racism is an intractable and permanent problem is a scary one that has to be considered regardless of one's certainty that there is no moral or rational basis for discrimination based on race. It's just that the reason racism might be insoluble is less, as Derbyshire suggests, a fundamental "trend to separation"[130] and more that there are still white people like John Derbyshire who are inclined to wax poetic about the precise reasons they hate black people, and that they exist in dangerously high numbers. This is not to deny the existence of racism even on the progressive left, nor to say that progressive racism is not just as much of a long-term danger. Rather, it's to point out the practical scariness of white nationalists: their presence ensures that an intelligent or productive discussion of race is always going to be poisoned by a bunch of dipshits chiming in to rant about human biodiversity.

Underpinning all of this is the fact that the white nationalist horror is a mythology. This is what underlies the "Zimmerman is white in every way that matters" issue that underpinned the Trayvon Martin shooting—that his whiteness is almost wholly negative, coming from the ability to avoid being viewed as black or Hispanic or anything else. But there's an inherent paranoia at the heart of this: the white nationalist monster, historically significant as it is and will be, has a glaring weak point in the form of its own monstrous terror of being invaded or violated. And moreover, that monster carries a power of its own, and one that is based in the same mythology as white nationalism.

Because, of course, the other way to describe whiteness instead of being not-seen-as-nonwhite is simply as being seen as "normal." And the idea that appearing at first glance like someone who probably has European ancestry is "normal" is a concept that emerges out of historical systems of power that emerged from Europe—systems of power, notably, that include both Moldbug's beloved monarchy and hated dissenters. Simply put, it was Europe that finished the task of mapping the world. European culture became the first global and near-universally known culture; it was the first memetic global pandemic.

In practical terms, of course, this pandemic was accomplished at weapon-point, a fact encompassed neatly in the factoid that there are exactly twenty-two countries in the world that have never been invaded by the British.[131] And this is where the right to be invaded draws its almost primal power from: the one thing Anglophone culture is unique in is never having experienced being taken over by another culture.

VI.

"Out from the kitchen to the bedroom to the hallway, your friend apologizes; he could see it my way. He let the contents of the bottle do the thinking. Can't shake the devil's hand and say you're only kidding. This is where the party ends."—
They Might Be Giants, "Your Racist Friend"

It would probably help to have some idea of non-white culture, then. But Trayvon Martin was the first person of color to come up in the book[132], and he's not really a philosopher. There are, of course, any number of thinkers on the subject of race and identity worth introducing. The point of this exercise is not to come up with some universal theory of non-whiteness. Rather, it is to come up with any theory of non-whiteness whatsoever—a vague starting point from which to start imagining our new post-invasion identities. For arcane reasons related mainly to my endgame (yes, I have one), I propose Frantz Fanon.

Fanon was born on Martinique, a French colony, to a middle-class family, but the defining incident in his life came in 1940 after France fell to Germany, resulting in the French troops on Martinique, who were blockaded, simply taking over the island and creating a collaborationist regime. Fanon fled the island three years later, fighting in the Free French army until the liberation of France, at which point he and other non-white soldiers were quietly dropped from the army due to the presence of photojournalists. But he returned to France after finishing school in Martinique, studying medicine, psychiatry, literature, and philosophy before writing his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The central idea of this book is, as he puts it, that "the black man has two dimensions," one defined internally, within the black community, and the other defined by the white community, and specifically by the way in which he must "act white" for their sake. In many ways this idea is an adaptation of W.E.B. DuBois's "double consciousness" (Fanon prefers "dual consciousness"), which he describes as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[133] But where DuBois frames it in terms of being looked at by the white world, Fanon frames it in terms of the performance put on—the second role and identity that is put on. But the end result is similar—as DuBois describes it, "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

It is of course difficult to adapt an idea like this straightforwardly. So much of it is built out of the real and lived experience of DuBois and Fanon—in

the real phenomenon of anger and pain that eventually found its expression in these ideas. But this is not a new problem—we did not, after all, let ourselves get unduly bothered about how Land's breakdown or Ligotti's illnesses rendered their work singular. The suffering that underpins these ideas is part of their power, but it is not the whole of it. Dual consciousness, within Fanon, is in no way a pleasurable situation. Rather it's a constant oppression—a gravity weighing on every moment of black life. But its misery is by and large a product of the historical circumstances in which this dual consciousness arose—the genuinely awful reality of life in Martinique. Might better circumstances produce a better dual consciousness?

To some extent, no. The underlying problem with dual consciousness—that its subject will want to reconcile the two in a way that is ultimately impossible—is intractable. It's also nothing we haven't already seen in Milton or Ligotti, though. And while we might not be able to engineer a dual consciousness free of existential angst, it certainly seems possible to create one without brutal structures of colonial oppression and the attendant sense of humiliation and degradation. But that still doesn't quite answer the real question underlying this, which is whether it's possible to produce a dual consciousness that is in some sense desirable.

The answer is yes, obviously, or we wouldn't be doing this. But more surprising is that the best example of it that we've seen so far is Eliezer Yudkowsky. Dual consciousness is exactly what Yudkowsky creates in coming up with ways to talk to the future AI-god that will make him immortal. Let's look at how the whole "acausal trade" thing actually gets established. Yudkowsky created it to solve something called Newcomb's Problem, which is a thought experiment where a being that can perfectly predict a human's actions presents them with two boxes, one transparent and the other opaque. Inside the transparent box is $1000. Inside the other one, however, is either $1,000,000 or nothing. The subject is allowed to take just the opaque box or both boxes. However the being has chosen whether the opaque box is empty or not based on their prediction of what the human will do—if it predicts they will take both boxes it is empty, but if it predicts they will just take the opaque one it has $1,000,000 in it. What should the subject do?

The reason this is tricky is that the subject's choice is not actually affecting the contents of the boxes, and so taking both boxes is necessarily going to have either the same payout as taking one or a larger payout. And yet the predictions are defined as perfect—to take two boxes is to guarantee that the second box is empty. The obvious solution is to declare that magical beings that can perfectly predict human behavior are inherently silly ideas and that the

entire problem is more interesting than it is important, but since Yudkowsky wants to be reincarnated as a perfect simulation by a futuristic artificial intelligence he doesn't think that. Instead he sees Newcomb's Problem as a very important issue and creates an entire new model for decision theory whose only real virtue compared to any other is that it offers a better solution to Newcomb's Problem.

The result of this is Timeless Decision Theory, which suggests that the prediction and the problem of picking a box are actually just two iterations of the same problem—an abstract computation roughly of the form "is this person going to pick one box or two." Accordingly, instead of thinking about one's actions in terms of "what am I going to do" one should think about it in terms of "what is the output of the abstract computation of what I'm going to do going to be."

But what's key about it is that it involves turning free will into a sort of self-prediction. To engage in Timeless Decision Theory is to create a dual consciousness, simultaneously looking at one's self as the person making a decision and as a person who evaluates your decision-making process externally. Indeed, to truly embrace Timeless Decision Theory as a form of rationality—a way to interact with the world—is to live in a self-imposed panopticon, making every decision as though one is deciding the predictions of an imaginary being that can perfectly predict you. One can imagine the dual consciousness that weighs on a Timeless Decision Theorist, wondering what their Predictor thinks of every little decision they make; their shoes, their job, their masturbation habits.

But crucially, that's the point. That's why this leads to Roko's Basilisk. The whole reason Yudkowsky is doing this is so that he can be in constant communion with the AI-god he aspires to live forever as a process running on. And indeed, given that, the usual relationship between someone and a Miltonian God looks a lot like dual consciousness as well. And the underlying implication—that religion creates dual consciousness—makes a certain intuitive sense, in that religion, like race, is based on metaphysics and mythology.

None of this is news to Nick Land, whose horror fiction is largely about invasion and contact with the outside. His most recent, *Chasm*, even has as an ostentatious Lovecraft-style racist savage muttering cryptically about dark things and at a key moment unexpectedly speaking perfect English to boot. But that's not surprising; Land's always had a clear regard for Yudkowsky, even if only to the extent of wanting to tease him about Roko's Basilisk. And we

should expect to see an almost fractal quality to the concept when we get this close to the heart of it.

Anyway, there's a larger implication in Yudkowsky's line of thought. The central perversity of Timeless Decision Theory is that it replaces the illusion of free will with the illusion of the Predictor's constant companionship. But the way that Yudkowsky can make this surprise conflation of individual consciousness and the alien brain parasite that will be riding within it for all time is through the idea of predicting someone else's actions. Indeed, the act of prediction would seem to be central to the whole idea of dual consciousness. To be dually conscious is to endlessly predict the response of an outside observer and moderate one's own actions to influence them. These are also the tools the AI uses to make Yudkowsky an immortal simulation, and for that matter the tools it uses to get out of the box.

But all of this goes back to Alan Turing, whose near-universally misunderstood paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" sets out this idea. Under the standard interpretation, this is the paper in which he invents what is generally called the Turing Test, a proposed standard for determining whether a machine can think based on whether it can fool a human into thinking they're carrying on a typed conversation with a person instead of a machine. This, however, is a complete misreading of Turing's paper, albeit one that's easy to make because the paper, being written in 1950, is almost as completely disconnected from any notion of contemporary AI research as Eliezer Yudkowsky and spends most of its length pondering questions like "but what about ESP?"

What Turing actually proposes, however, is considerably subtler and weirder. First he sets up what he calls "the imitation game," a which requires three people, a man, a woman, and an interrogator. The interrogator talks with both the man and woman via typed conversation, asking them questions, and then attempts to identify the actual woman. Turing then says, "We now ask the question, 'What will happen when a machine takes the part of A in this game?' Will the interrogator decide wrongly as often when the game is played like this as he does when the game is played between a man and a woman? These questions replace our original, 'Can machines think?'" In other words, the test is not, as it is commonly taken to be, "can a machine use language?" but rather "can a machine do as well as a human male at impersonating a human female?"

This has several implications, including an unsettling one about how men are the default setting and women are unfathomable aliens, a pathology that is perhaps understandable given Turing's personal biography but that seems to

have had a dispiritingly large impact on nerd culture going forward. Past that, it connects to the rest of Turing's thought in a way the language-based interpretation of the Turing Test does not. Turing was not a linguist, and his research had no particular connection with the field. It did, however, have a tremendous relationship with the idea of imitation.

The other major thing named after him is the Turing Machine, a simple theoretical model for a computer that turns out to be capable of solving any problem that can be solved on a modern computer or on any other theoretical computer devised to date. One of the many things a Turing Machine turns out to be capable of doing is taking the design of another Turing Machine as input, along with a set of inputs appropriate for that second machine, and then running calculations about the machine, including simulating what it would do.

This is called a Universal Turing Machine, and is central to one of Turing's most important contributions to mathematics, a proof that the halting problem cannot be solved. It's also, however, structurally similar to the imitation game, making it a stunning case of Turing using the same solution for two very different problems. In both cases, Turing ends up defining a mode of thinking in terms of its ability to model another mode of thinking. The imitation game ultimately hinges on the ability of a man or a machine to successfully imagine the mind of a woman, just as the Universal Turing Machine requires a sort of imagining of another Turing Machine. And this is also clearly what goes on in Yudkowsky's idea of prediction, or indeed, of reincarnating him as an immortal computer program.

The obvious umbrella term for this is "empathy," and that word leads to most of the other implications, as it's one that comes up in a lot of critiques of neoreaction and of the sorts of people who like to call themselves "rationalists." But before any of that comes up there's a very big philosophical statement to make, which is that Alan Turing suggests that the fundamental nature of thought and, by implication, of humanity is the capacity for empathy, in much the same way that enlightenment liberalism suggests that it is free will and Ligotti suggests that it is consciousness.

This is not an entirely novel idea; Aristotle, after all, proclaimed man to be an "imitative creature" in the *Poetics*, which remains the fundamental basis for literally all understanding of narrative in the western world millennia after its composition. Countless philosophical and psychological concepts can be argued to be along these lines with no more than a paragraph or two's work, not least the opposition between Will Graham's profiling ability, explicitly based in an excess of empathy, and Hannibal's carnal aesthetic. But the right to

be invaded is clearly among them. Empathy is what distinguishes invasion from destruction; the means by which a relationship between the inside and outside is forged and maintained. It is also what enables invasion to be desirable; contact with the outside becomes something we are hardwired to want, and the inclination to exercise the faculty of empathy so that we can imagine things more and more alien to ourselves is as natural as the inclination to exercise our legs or mental faculties.

The concept of empathy is particularly interesting, however, because it manages to be a key that opens every lock. All three of our main thinkers fail in key ways to grapple with empathy. As one would expect, Land comes closest to working meaningfully with the concept. In many regards his early academic work can be read as an experiment in radical empathy—an attempt to explore what the limits of understanding are. As *Fanged Noumena* co-editor Robin Mackay puts it, "Land saw thanatos—the death-drive, the unknown outside—insinuating its way into the human by way of eros. The unbridled production of new brands of erotic adventure within capitalism ushered in a transformation of the human, cutting its bonds with the (cultural, familial, and ultimately biological) past and opening it up to new, inorganic distributions of affect. Compared to the known—the strata of organic redundancy in which 'the human' was interred—such unknowns were to be unhesitatingly affirmed."[134] But this statement exists in stark contrast with his *Phyl-Undhu*-era focus on the unknown as a source of horror, and that contrast largely defines Land's neoreactionary turn. In other words, Land's engagement with empathy is for the most part a conscious and mindful rejection of it.

In the end, though… well, his rejection still sucks. It's not that he's wrong in finding horror within the notion of empathy. We arrived at the concept via Thomas Ligotti, after all. But Land overplays his hand, acting as though empathy is just horror as opposed to something that is, among other things, scary. As a result, he ends up siding with a bunch of racist morons just because those are the other people who are as terrified of the outside world as him. And yes, there's something genuinely compelling about that turn, but it's ultimately just that it's pretty clear that turn was a consequence of his going mad, and madness and horror go together well. And, look, not to put too fine a point on it, but the major lesson to take from Land's madness is not that any of the concepts he was working with were mere inches from some devastating red pill, it's that you shouldn't take so many fucking amphetamines. In other words, however deliberate Land's rejection of empathy is, it's still his biggest flaw.

As for Moldbug, the problem is subtler, in that he has an almost pathological disinterest in the notion. In the entirety of *Unqualified Reservations* it comes up three times, all in an especially rambling post about how America is a communist country in which he avoids ever actually mentioning Marx. But its absence is revealing of a larger tendency and failing on Moldbug's part. At the heart of Moldbug's fundamental failings as a philosopher is his misapplied expertise. He's an accomplished software engineer, and has visibly concluded that because software engineering is hard and history/philosophy are easy if he can do the former well he can obviously do the latter well, and indeed better than people who are actually trained in it. But perhaps the larger problem is simply that he's got some fundamental flaws as a software engineer in the first place.

To oversimplify a lot of things, there are few fields with as wide a disparity in aesthetic ideals and practical realities as programming. Actual software that exists in the world is a bewildering tangle of pragmatic compromises reached by people whose relationship with caffeine as they desperately chase deadlines is analogous to Nick Land's relationship with amphetamines. There is almost no elegant theory or underlying design principle. There is just spur-of-the-moment cleverness soldered together with legacy code with an inefficiency that puts evolution to shame.

On the other hand, Mencius Moldbug—or rather Curtis Yarvin—is an elegant genius of an engineer who creates genuinely revelatory software that serves as an expression of coherent philosophical principles about the very nature of computing. His current project, Urbit, is representative—an ambitious reinvention of the Internet according to first principles. It might even be real software that exists someday as opposed to MIRI-esque vapor. But it's nearly useless. The problems it solves are so bound up in its principles of what security and freedom mean in the context of software design that only a handful of people in the world care about them. It will never catch on, except possibly via the one practical application of most weird blockchain-type technology, namely criminal activity (despite Moldbug's no doubt heartfelt insistence that it won't). And perhaps most importantly, it's arguably even more batshit crazy than *Unqualified Reservations*, featuring things like a programming language in which there's an increment operator but no decrement, such that you have to write a recursive function using increments to accomplish what is typically among the simplest things you can do in a programming language.[135] (Even Brainfuck has a decrement operator.) Clearly Yarvin is not the sort of software engineer who spends a lot of time thinking

about the user, which is to say, not the sort of software engineer with much empathy.

So when he indulges in philosophy as Moldbug he does it badly in two regards. Not only does he mistakenly believe that he's good at it, the things he tries to do with it are fundamentally malformed, twisted beasts. That's what's at the heart of his most singularly bizarre declaration, that the purpose of government is profit. Its main appeal isn't even that it's a good idea—although he gloms onto a libertarian intellectual tradition that supports it. No, its real appeal is simply that it lets him objectively measure how well a government is doing, which makes it a lot easier to come up with a clever design for one. And that's the heart of everything that's dumb about Mencius Moldbug's ideas—the problem that leads to his first facepalming idiocy. The reason Mencius Moldbug likes the idea of a king is simply that it represents an efficient and elegant design. That's what his fundamental and absolute dedication to order over chaos is, really. And it leads him to look at slavery as an efficient design that just presents a couple of implementation challenges.

Yudkowsky has much the same problem, only on an even larger scale. With Moldbug the sense is overwhelmingly that empathy just never crossed his mind as something to factor into his design. He flat out didn't think of it. Yudkowsky, on the other hand, thinks about it a lot and cares very deeply about it; he's just incompetent at it. Yudkowsky talks about empathic inference, describing it as "configuring your own brain in a similar state to the brain that you want to predict (in a controlled sort of way that doesn't lead you to actually hit anyone). This may yield good predictions, but that's not the same as understanding. You can predict angry people by using your own brain in empathy mode. But could you write an angry computer program? You don't know how your brain is making the successful predictions. You can't print out a diagram of the neural circuitry involved. You can't formalize the hypothesis; you can't make a well-understood physical system that predicts without human intervention; you can't derive the exact predictions of the model; you can't say what you know."[136]

It is difficult to know where to begin. What is perhaps most perplexing is how clinical the description is. Recall that we got to empathy through imagery of infection, invasion, and trauma. It is not a tame or easy subject. But more significant than the problems of tone are the problems of content. In particular, Yudkowsky's decision to equate "understanding" with the capacity to "make a well-understood physical system that predicts without human intervention" is a move that accuses the overwhelming majority of the human

population of not understanding anything whatsoever. It's not that there aren't definitions of "understanding" where that's true, of course, and it's part of what the title *LessWrong* means, but it's notable that he's defined the term out of all practical utility.

The result is that he overlooks the ways in which empathy *is* a powerful mode of understanding. Which is part and parcel of its capacity for horror, of course. And the problem recurs throughout Yudkowsky. Look at him talking about emotion: "I label an emotion as 'not rational' if it rests on mistaken beliefs, or rather, on irrational epistemic conduct: 'If the iron approaches your face, and you believe it is hot, and it is cool, the Way opposes your fear. If the iron approaches your face, and you believe it is cool, and it is hot, the Way opposes your calm.' Conversely, then, an emotion which is evoked by correct beliefs or epistemically rational thinking is a 'rational emotion'; and this has the advantage of letting us regard calm as an emotional state, rather than a privileged default. When people think of 'emotion' and 'rationality' as opposed, I suspect that they are really thinking of System 1 and System 2—fast perceptual judgments versus slow deliberative judgments. Deliberative judgments aren't always true, and perceptual judgments aren't always false; so it is very important to distinguish that dichotomy from 'rationality.' Both systems can serve the goal of truth, or defeat it, according to how they are used."[137]

It's tempting to describe this as an attempt to characterize emotion by someone who has never actually had one, although that's unfair.[138] And in another post about emotion he talks quite powerfully about it, acknowledging that "it's *embarrassing* to feel," emphasis his, before saying, "I know, now, that there's nothing wrong with feeling strongly. Ever since I adopted the rule of 'That which can be destroyed by the truth should be,' I've also come to realize 'That which the truth nourishes should thrive.' When something good happens, I am happy, and there is no confusion in my mind about whether it is rational for me to be happy. When something terrible happens, I do not flee my sadness by searching for fake consolations and false silver linings. I visualize the past and future of humankind, the tens of billions of deaths over our history, the misery and fear, the search for answers, the trembling hands reaching upward out of so much blood, what we could become someday when we make the stars our cities, all that darkness and all that light—I know that I can never truly understand it, and I haven't the words to say. Despite all my philosophy I am still embarrassed to confess strong emotions, and you're probably uncomfortable hearing them. But I know, now, that it is rational to feel."[139]

But it's telling that the really powerful part there is the weird religious reverie in the middle about the tens of billions of deaths—the spot where Yudkowsky sublimates himself in the stark realization that Kleio is not some bucolic maiden in a wheat field but a faceless Exterminator stalking civilization; that history is out to get us. No wonder he feels embarrassed about that emotion: it's really not one for polite company, because it is almost Ligottian in its bleakness. That, in turn, points to the main error in the passage, which is the suggestion that it's normative to feel shame about strong emotions.

I mean, it's not that that's not a thing. It's just that Yudkowsky's kind of talked himself into a circle by the time he gets to it, having opened the post by musing about the misconception that "rationality opposes all emotion." He's trying to tackle the whole Mr. Spock stereotype, but can't quite get out from under the basic value judgment at the heart of it. And so because he's uncomfortable with emotion he ends up weirdly downplaying empathy, treating it, notably, as a thing accomplished by "configuring your own brain" into "empathy mode," as though it's some sort of conscious act of will to be invaded.

Which leads to the real problem, which is that Yudkowsky thinks of empathy in terms of peering into black boxes, and as a thing that is done. The result of this approach is that Yudkowsky, without really meaning to, tends to look at everyone else in the world as inefficient Eliezer Yudkowskys instead of people as such. And this proves to be a major problem when you're proclaiming yourself a visionary genius of rationality. (Ironically, the *LessWrong* crowd talks at length about this sort of error, the Typical Mind Fallacy. As with many fallacies, they're much better at identifying it than avoiding it.)

But the real takeaway is the idea of vilifying emotion and empathy. Which is a common sentiment among the sorts of people who like writers like Yudkowsky and Moldbug. Nick Land, for instance. There's a bigger ideology here, though' one that, at least in terms of Yudkowsky, is perhaps best encapsulated by the ghoulish spectacle of his followers trying to convince the Effective Altruism movement—a school of thought that focuses on quantitative analysis of philanthropy, and that the *LessWrong* crowd had been early proponents of—with a slightly sanitized version of Roko's Basilisk (with logic that was immediately called out for being Pascalian) that claimed that because a malevolent AI would be the worst thing ever, donating to MIRI was more important than malaria nets.[140] But it's also visible in the besieged attitude of white nationalists as well as other ugly corners of the Dark

Enlightenment like "Men's Rights Activists" who decry the "irrationality" of women, or chan culture's vocal and explicit hatred of empathy. There is, throughout this corner of the world, a deficiency of empathy that is not merely lack or failure, but an active, conscious disdain. Moldbug, Yudkowsky, and Land don't just "do poorly" with empathy—they represent the most visible and explicit edge of a Cathedral-scaled system of values that casts the desire to listen and try to understand people who are different from you as anathema to reason itself.

At last, then, we have a credible answer to the most stubbornly worrisome of neoreactionary arguments—that Malthusian limits will eventually reassert themselves and tribal affiliations will reign supreme anyway, so you may as well give up on diversity before it's too late. Perhaps they will, and a historical period of war is inevitable given current conditions. But if so, "values empathy towards outsiders" is just as effective a tribal delineation as any, and probably a fair bit more effective than DNA haplogroups. Put another way, maybe the neoreactionaries are right and we're going to have to shoot some people; if so, let's shoot them first.

And, of course, there's a real temptation to build a contrary system; a vision of the world that takes empathy as its central virtue. It's fertile ground for utopian thinking. Those interested might look further and deeper at Fanon, as well as at Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, not to mention generally embracing large quantities of feminist and postcolonial theory. A rigorously thought out system is just a disjointed series of blogposts away.

But that's just denying the truth. The reality is that we're fucked, and that a vision of society based on empathy does not extend productively from late capitalism. At best, it's what we should have done. Nevertheless, we might consider recognizing it as a core vision of ourselves, even if that vision is no more than the story of a cancer patient told to make sense of the notion of the end. If we can't convincingly write it into our future, we can at least write it into our past. I do not particularly mean this in the sense of the progressive tradition that Moldbug and Land ineptly rail against, although I think its more radical aspects are worth exploring further. Indeed, on one level I mean it in an almost classically primitivist sense, a reminder that the foundational elements of this whole experiment in "human civilization" were always based around the act of recognizing the Other, even if only to enslave or kill them. Neoreactionaries are exceedingly fond of their essentialist tales of "human nature"; we ought allow ourselves a myth of our own.

Indeed, let us take this as our final task, the goal for one last pass through the labyrinth of concepts we have thus far mapped. A final stab at sketching the monster at its heart. From here on out, no new thinkers, just a final attempt to bring the overall concept into view. Land identifies a desire for a "white" identity, which, due to its paranoias about purity, is doomed to be a stunted, monstrous thing. We have discarded the paranoia, but we have not escaped the general question of white identity. And it's a pertinent one, especially given the overwhelming whiteness of the discussion: is there any sort of redemptive vision of white culture to be had? Or is the role of western culture essentially that of the great fuckup, the individualist philosophy that leads inexorably to capitalism having turned out to be a disastrous misstep that ruined the ecology of the planet?

But while we've discarded the paranoia, we've also discarded the utopian conceit that the outside might ever save us. Which is to say that we may have reimagined white culture as wanting to be muddied and transformed, but we've also rejected the means by which to do it. We can't get away from that notion of purity entirely, after all. But instead of purity as an object of paranoia that is, as Land puts it, "besieged," it will have to be something that is an object of mourning—a tragic loss. If whiteness is not something to fetishistically maintain then it is an absence, and indeed a lack.

If one wants to engage in crude psychoanalysis, one might accuse the rank and file neoreactionaries of demonstrating the truth of this, reading their fascination with cuckolding as an ethnosexual version of the gay homophobe (and neoreaction is riddled with both gays and homophobes). And more broadly, anger is an all-too-easy-to-empathize-with reaction to wanting something you can't have. But we can do more than just understand Nick Land fandom with this approach. There are new monsters to build.

If the Weird fails, apply the hauntological. We cannot deliver whiteness to its longed for death at the hands of the outside, and so we must kill it from within. This may seem at first glance impossible; after all, we've already established its defining negativity as meaning that it has no interior. But we have a way out here: let us assume that we are fucked. Which is to say, let us embrace the central paranoia that Land describes—that because whiteness is fragile and easily contaminated it believes itself endangered and on the brink of a form of genocide—and take it one step further. Instead of assuming that whiteness is always on the brink of a catastrophic invasion of the Other, let us assume that it has already happened, and that any instance of whiteness we look at contains, somewhere within it, the taint and infection that will prove its undoing.

For better or for worse, this is not a particularly large departure from white nationalist thinking, which has always had a place for the enemy within. Indeed, Land identifies the tendency with wit, quoting a passage by a white nationalist writer that takes an unexpected turn (at least to anyone who isn't familiar with white nationalist writing) in its final line: "That's the labyrinth, the trap, with its pitifully constricted, stereotypical circuit. 'Why can't we be cuddly racial preservationists, like Amazonian Indians? How come we always turn into Neo-Nazis? It's some kind of conspiracy, which means it has to be the Jews.'"[141] And, of course, it's not as though the rank and file neoreactionaries are not blithely anti-Semitic on a regular basis (which is more than faintly ironic, given that Yarvin is Jewish).

"My, what an impressively diverse collection of rhetorical moves you employ" is not, of course, a sentiment regularly expressed to anti-Semites, and with good reason. Their gambit is universal, and indeed displayed in the line after the quote Land reacts to, from a blogger named Tanstaafl who, after concluding that it's all the Jews' fault, asks rhetorically, "Is it factually incorrect to note that the West's entertainment, mass media, and banking systems are disproportionately controlled, even dominated, by Jews? Am I imagining their inordinate sway in academia?"[142] This is always the charge: you can tell the Jews are dangerous because of their disproportionate representation in the corridors of power.

What's important about this is not that there's a goddamn bit of sense to it, but rather that it's a fundamentally different paranoia than, say, cuckolding. This isn't the outside coming in and destroying the last refuge of whiteness. This is the suggestion that the most crucial institutions of power have already fallen into the hands of the Other. And indeed, the choice of the Jews to represent this fear highlights just how deep the horror goes, because it's not like the Jewish diaspora was a "just a couple generations ago" thing like the end of American slavery. If it's the Jews that did it, it got done millennia ago.

While the fascination with who to blame is wholly uninteresting (and the answer of "the Jews" idiotic), the underlying pathology has potential. It suggests a weakness in white culture so deeply embedded as to be functionally inseparable from its basic nature. This forces us to consider white culture as a set of perpetual ruins—as something that has always been lost, and that can only be apprehended as a tenuous and incomplete reconstruction. But more to the point, it resolves one of the fundamental idiocies of white nationalism. Obviously just one; anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are just as disqualifyingly idiotic as scientific racism, after all. But it's hard not to admit that anti-

Semitism is a more complex sort of moronic racism than "black people are inherently unintelligent and were better off as farm equipment."

What's interesting about it, of course, is that it's actually a position that makes sense when talking about something with the global supremacy of the Cathedral. I mean, not to give too obvious an answer to Land's rhetorical "Why can't we be cuddly racial preservationists?" but once you've gone and altered literally every other culture on the planet, preservation is simply not a problem you still have to solve. And by redirecting the paranoia to a deep-seated element of white culture, anti-Semitism creates a form of idiocy that actually responds to the modern world.

But what's key is how deep-seated an element it is. In the case of anti-Semitism, the obvious thing to point out is the way in which Christianity, often though not always treated as a vital part of white/western culture, is inexorably linked to Judaism such that there's no way to have western culture without Judaism. Again, the point is not that Judaism is a remotely plausible or interesting candidate for where we might find the our final monster, but rather the idea that white culture has already fallen.

This does not escape the scope of white nationalism, although that's rather what global supremacy means. Still, it's worth recognizing that the "fallen west" remains a myth that can be played in a straight neoreactionary manner. "Make America great again," as Steve Jobs or someone said.[143] And indeed, Moldbug's vision of the Cathedral as the product of the continual triumph of the Dissenters differs from the Jewish conspiracy only in the details of who's responsible; the Puritans apparently turning out to be a techno-atheist's version of the Jews. Assuming that we're fucked means explicitly proclaiming that you can't make America great again, and even if you could, whatever you got would not be an "again" in any meaningful sense. But we're on uncertain ground, carving out space in the ugliest gutters of the gilded city of the philosophers.

Let us take a moment and reflect, then, on the basic nature of uncertain ground. We have already briefly mentioned the most fundamental take on the issue, namely the halting problem, which Alan Turing proved to be insoluble. Although the underlying mathematics are complex, the basic problem is simple enough. As any PC user can attest, left running a computer will eventually either blue screen or get stuck with the cursor as an hourglass. Or, to put it in more formal computer science terms, any given combination of program and input will eventually either halt and return some sort of output (blue screen) or will get stuck running forever (hourglass). The halting

problem simply asks which result will occur. Or, rather, in its general case—which is what Turing proved was insoluble (or, technically, undecidable)—it asks whether it is possible to build a program that can look at other programs and determine whether they will halt or not.

Turing's proof is a special case of Kurt Gödel's famous Incompleteness Theorem, which proved that there are mathematical conjectures that cannot be proven true or false, and furthermore that it is impossible to identify all of these conjectures. And there's a whole host of such problems and proofs, most of which hinge on showing that within a given way of expressing things you can say things like "this statement is false." Indeed, the writer Douglas Hofstadter has made a career out of writing about such "strange loops," as he calls them, most notably in his pop science classic *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, which is what nerdy teenagers in the 1980s read instead of *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality*, largely to their credit.

The fascination with these sorts of things is straightforward enough. It's the same appeal as the name *LessWrong*: the acknowledgment of reason's frailty. And thus it is a figure we've seen repeatedly in this labyrinth, whether we called it monstrous offspring, the red pill, or pwnage. (It's not even one that can evade the insidious tentacles of the white nationalist monster; what more important thinker on the subject of uncertainty is there than Werner Heisenberg?) But of these many iterations of the idea there is perhaps none as fundamentally unsettling as Turing's proof. Not even Fish/Milton's notion of the fundamental transgressiveness of language makes quite so deep-reaching an observation about the basic nature of human thought.

The terror lies in the theoretical computer Turing outlines in order to frame his strange loop, the Turing Machine. Its design is extraordinarily simple, essentially a list of items and a flowchart that can read from and write to the list. (Turing specifies it as a ticker tape divided into cells and a device that can read a single cell, write to a cell, and advance one cell forward or backwards as instructed by a finite table of instructions.) But, as mentioned, since Turing formulated the notion in 1936 nobody has been able to outline a design via which it is possible to perform a calculation that cannot be modeled on a Turing Machine, and the hypothesis that no such design exists, called the Church-Turing thesis, is generally accepted as probably true. The laptop upon which I am writing this is wildly faster and more efficient than the ticker tape imagined by Turing, but as long as you don't mind everything running really slow, you could still port all of its programs to the Turing Machine.

Indeed, there's no reason not to think you could port a human brain to a Turing Machine. True, strictly speaking there's no proof that such a thing is

possible at all, and it's certainly not even remotely so with current technology, but the set of things a human can do that a computer can't shrinks by the day without any obvious distinction between the two emerging. The possibility that we are a ticker tape machine made of neurons is inescapably plausible.

I admit that I am not sure whether it is ironic or inevitable that Eliezer Yudkowsky provides the final push into horror. Recall his literary Bayesianism, or, better yet, Bayes' theorem itself. To recap, Bayes' theorem is a model for how one can reasonably update one's assumptions based on new information. For instance, in the example we discussed earlier Yudkowsky looked at what the probability that someone has breast cancer is given that they've had a positive mammogram. But another perfectly usable example is how one might evaluate the likelihood that the human brain is a biomechanical device that, like my laptop, is functionally equivalent to a Turing Machine. And the cold Bayesian truth is that eighty years of computer science research in which design after design has proven equivalent to a Turing Machine does rather suggest that a design created by a couple billion years of blind evolution probably would be too. (Stronger forms of this claim can be found in the form of "digital physics," which holds that physics itself, and thus the entire universe, must be computable.)

This realization is not catastrophe, but very specifically horror. It is the realization that there is no way to tell if there's a way out of any given intellectual labyrinth when you're in it. That any train of thought could be not even a dead end, but a fool's errand, constantly giving the impression that it is going somewhere without ever resolving. That there is no such thing as knowing that you're onto something. This is not a debilitating problem (unless of course it is), but it is irreducible—a hideous truth manifested out of the raw idealism of mathematics itself.

What is important is not so much what follows from this—ultimately nothing that doesn't also follow from Ligotti, or even from Land's observation that, historically speaking, one cannot bet with confidence against reactionary thugs—as the aesthetics of it. It is an oddly compelling fit with our image of white culture's global supremacy. It is the perfect frame with which to understand the sense of stuttering confusion as the impenetrable limits of the planet's atmosphere became white culture's border. Have we halted? Is this the end? Is the Great Filter just slow collapse—an endless sequence of laps on the same ring road as we wait to finally run out of fuel without ever knowing if we had a destination? Are these ruins or buildings in which we shiver?

If they are to be ruins, and that is what we have chosen, they are far from the white nationalist dreams of Albert Speer—some enduring planetary

society that will endure then pass away into a beauty more eternal. Even the neoreactionaries know that. White culture's ruins are mental ruins. The analogy to use is a dementia patient, their world a blur of half-recalled faces and daydreams they can't remember if they've woken from. There is a popular therapy technique at nursing homes for dementia patients whereby a mock wedding will be held, with an acted-out ceremony followed by real cake, music and dancing. The patients will fall into the rhythms of a memory, happily enjoying a wedding they're not quite sure why they're at, confidently recounting stories about a bride and groom who are in reality just two volunteers from the local high school.[144]

The key and fascinating takeaway is that the social order itself—the ritual and theater of a wedding—can be carried out long after the capacity for understanding has eroded. We are talking, after all, about a population that would be hard-pressed to pass the standard interpretation of the Turing Test, little yet the empathy-based one. And yet the imitation of civilization and all its trappings continues, a drone without an operator. (Or, as Ligotti would have it, a puppet.) It is perhaps the best image for white culture that we have found so far—a quasi-consciousness without direction, going through the motions of civilization while it waits to find out how the story ends.

There's a central implication to this worth unpacking, which is the idea that white culture fails the Turing Test. There are obviously complexities in translating this out of metaphor; unlike a nursing home patient, white culture cannot be simply placed at a computer keyboard and told to imitate a woman, and the question of whether it can be modeled on a Turing Machine gives every indication of being as undecidable as the halting problem. But as Nick Land observes, "If you think there's a difference between capitalism and artificial intelligence you're not seeing either at all clearly."[145] And while we'll have to pay the price of unpacking that statement eventually (not that there's much eventually left), for now let's pick at the consequences.

After all, if we are to treat white culture as some sort of existent phenomenon we must assign to it some mechanism of action upon the world. Whatever Kleio's identity, even the Muse of History works through human actors. But the question cannot simply be whether those who act on white culture's behalf would be capable of passing the Turing Test, nor can it be; actual humans, after all, are defined as the control group in the Test's proper formulation. The general principle, however, can still be applied. Simply put, does white culture retain the capacity for empathy?

If the answer is "no" then neoreaction almost demands to be read as a symptom of this loss. Certainly that's what China Miéville suggests in "On Social Sadism," a searing look at the propensity towards casual sadism within late capitalism. Of course sadism and empathy are not mutually exclusive; as *Hannibal* observes, "Extreme acts of cruelty require a high level of empathy."[146] And fair enough, but the point of social sadism is that it is not the sort of sadism that has, as Miéville puts it, "Mephistophelean splendour," nor is it the disinterested cliché of the banality of evil. Instead "it's a party-goer; boisterous; braying; a frat alumnus; a bully who loves being a bully; a successful professional, lip-smacking at the misery of those s/he hurts; and one who is increasingly happy to cop to that enjoyment, to proclaim it, to perform it."[147]

It's the final phrase that's key, and that distinguishes the sadism of the pre-eschaton from the countless sadisms and atrocities of history. And yet Miéville is equally clear that social sadism is an eternal part of the western liberal tradition—in what is for our purposes the essay's key line, he notes, "The Enlightenment was always a dark enlightenment." And to an extent all Miéville is doing in "On Social Sadism" is restating Land with a sense of outrage, although the essay's later sections, which remark on the possibility of a politics of radical empathy and of joy as an alternative to hope, are another excellent source for anyone seeking to construct a new utopian vision of humanity based around the faculty of empathy. Land's entire point, after all, is that capitalism is an inhuman process. When Miéville proclaims that "social sadism is a culture of death," it's all too easy to imagine Nick Land grinning enthusiastically and nodding.

But Miéville's point cuts deeper than that. It's true that his vision of the frat boy as sadistic monster is in many ways Land's Cracker Factory a little further up the class ladder and described from an oppositional perspective, but there's still that image of performance, which is, for Miéville, tied inextricably to the notion that social sadism is a sadism of excess. It is extreme not in the sense that *Hannibal* alludes to—an extremism based on a sort of exquisite focus—but is extreme like carpet bombing is extreme, for no reason other than its disproportion to the task. It is not characterized by lack of empathy so much as by an abscessed, festered empathy. Tellingly, Miéville uses the word "surplus," which, within his own Marxist framework, ties it inexorably to the notion of profit; think here of Moldbug's declaration that profit is the purpose of government and almost the whole of neoreaction becomes clear. And indeed, the idea of a boisterous, partying, drunken performance of sadism

runs at once appealingly and uneasily close to the image of dementia patients at a fake wedding, a ritualized process that is not so much dispassionate as it is haunted by a confused and misfiring passion. Neoreaction as terminal restlessness, the most brutal aspects of western civilization's material engine firing blindly into the onrushing black, both figuratively and, as with George Zimmerman, literally.

Very well then. But what of Land's equation of capitalism and artificial intelligence through which we arrived at the point? Which, indeed, sits almost precisely adjacent to the one branch of our initial inquiry we've yet to grapple adequately with, the technofetishism shared by Moldbug, Land, and Yudkowsky. What's that bit of the design for?

VII.

Your victory was so complete
Some among you thought to keep
A record of our little lives
The clothes we wore, our spoons, our knives
The games of luck our soldiers played
The stones we cut, the songs we made
Our law of peace which understands
A husband leads, a wife commands.
And all of this, expressions of
The sweet indifference some call love
The high indifference some call fate
But we had names more intimate
Names so deep and names so true
They're blood to me, they're dust to you
There is no need that this survive
There's truth that lives and truth that dies
—Leonard Cohen, "Nevermind"

The most basic answer, of course, would be straightforward technological determinism. Certainly there are inventive eschatons to construct this way. Land, in *Phyl-Undhu*, suggests a potential Great Filter: "absorption into simulations. Cultures swirling out of the universe like dirty water down a plug. Derealization vortices." The joke, of course, is the philosophical idea of simulationism, best framed in its most familiar pop culture terms: we're living in the Matrix. Build out from the grim reality of software as bug-ridden shamble of inelegant and barely-working hacks and shortcuts, also a fair description of the evolutionary process, and you get a depressingly sound account of civilization's fall.

But a straightforwardly causal argument misses what is in some ways the more profound observation, which is that history, evolution, and technological development are all similarly messy and entropic processes. This is Land's actual point when he makes his observation about capitalism and AI: "The Austrians already understood that capitalism is an information processing system, and the decentralized robotics / networks types on the other side grasp that AI isn't going to happen in a research lab. 'Anthropomorphism' has nothing to do with it. Complex Adaptive Systems are the place to start," he says, before citing Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, which contains one of the earliest

discussions of the possibility of thinking machines, to demonstrate his point.[148]

So the question is less why we would associate technology and eschatology than what we ought make of the current vogue towards picking that particular association. In this regard it's worth thinking in shorter historical terms and recalling that just a few decades ago the reactionary fad was not technofetishism but social Darwinism, with the unchecked excess of capitalism justified as "survival of the fittest." The selection of technology as the analogous process to history as opposed to biology, then, is clearly a substantive cultural move.

To some extent it's just a generational thing, much like using anime characters as your Twitter icon. This is simply the face of eschatology in the decade after cyberpunk, Y2K, *The Matrix*, and *Starcraft*. Those wishing for an interpretation more rooted in macro-history might simply note that the most short-term Great Filters are those originating in the industrial revolution while society itself reels in the early wake of the digital one. The combination makes techno-eschatology irresistibly on-point.

But perhaps we ought maintain our skepticism of causality arguments and ask a question other than "why." For instance, what is the actual content of this technofetishism? Like any eroticization it is as tinged with horror as it is with ecstasy. Land embodies this, but it is perhaps Yudkowsky that illustrates it most clearly simply because he considers the two poles separately. On the one hand is his imagined utopia, reincarnated immortally by his AI god; on the other, the basilisk.

What has always been most prominent about these two techno-eschatons is that they reach backwards to the present. It's not as though this is unique to Yudkowsky, of course—Land's early work used much the same imagery in grappling with capitalism, and he was blatantly just ripping off the plot of *Terminator*, much as *Terminator* ripped off some Harlan Ellison *Outer Limits* scripts. But it's a notable fantasy for several reasons. First, and most obviously, it assumes a future. Even eternal torment at the hands of the basilisk is preferable to dying pointlessly in the food riots that follow California's climate-change-spurred collapse into dust. Second, it renders the future material, not just as a certainty but as something that, like the past, leaves artifacts in the present.

Fueling this is a particular vision of technology—one that, we really ought stress, is a fantasy not just in the way it imagines a particular and improbable sequence of technological developments, but in the way in which it imagines

technological development as something with a teleology in the first place. There is, crucially, no particular reason to assume this. There's barely a reason to assume that scientific knowledge is something with a teleology, and the equivocation of science and technological development is just as dubious a leap. But the techno-eschaton does so, presuming blithely that artificial intelligence is something that is advanced towards, as opposed to a weird idea.

And it's worth noting, it really might just be a weird idea from some science fiction stories like FTL drives or time travel; a piece of magic that is in fact entirely distinct from advanced technology. Just as we could not entirely rule out the possibility that we are Turing machines, the possibility that the Turing Test actually cannot be passed by a digital computer still cannot be definitively rejected through means other than faith. (Nor can its more unsettling counterpart—the possibility that a Turing-complete computer might be capable of imitating a human female more persuasively than an actual human female.) But the singular vision of their Singularity is not so much the point as that they believe in *any* Singularity—that there is such a thing as a historically necessary interaction between technology and humanity.

Land, in particular, is full of these. Where Yudkowsky is interesting in the absurd particularity of his techno-eschaton, Land simply gloms onto any and all of them. Futuristic AIs, bionic horizons, Great Filters, within Land's thought you practically can't move for moments where destiny is a technology, all of them, in the end, moments of faith in some hypothesis where the jury may well be out forever. But Land shares Yudkowsky's basic problem: unlike Moldbug, neither of them know a damn thing about building technology. They're both technology fans as opposed to engineers—self-educated dilettantes who read a lot of science and technology articles, both general and specialist. But they have opinions on how computers will develop. Neither of them make them. It's not that this is a problem, of course; users are people too. But it gives their thoughts on the techno-eschaton a particular flavor that, say, an actual software engineer's musings lack. Indeed, the flavor is not entirely unlike that of a software engineer attempting to reinvent political philosophy to someone with any actual expertise or training in the humanities.

But it's worth pointing out that Moldbug is, in fact, an enormously talented engineer. Not least because these are ultimately the terms on which he suggests that his philosophy ought be judged. His very first post on *Unqualified Reservations*, back when he still called his position "formalism," opens by saying, "The other day I was tinkering around in my garage and I decided to build a new ideology," framing the entire project unmistakably in the Steve Jobs-style "I built a tech company in my garage" tradition. Later in the same

post he makes it explicit, declaring that the trick to solving the problem of violence forever is "to look at this not as a moral problem, but as an engineering problem."[149]

The problem is that if his project is to be judged on these terms, it's self-evidently a failure. And to be clear, I don't mean that it does not present a remotely credible worldview, nor that it has not, in point of fact, solved the problem of violence or indeed made a whit of headway on it. These are both true statements, and answer more important questions than whether Moldbug did a good job of engineering a philosophy. What I mean is very simply that there is a gaping and slightly comical hole in Moldbug's design as a design. Literally. In his third and final attempt at a magnum opus, the *Gentle Introduction*, Moldbug divides the ninth and final part into three subsections: Part 9a, Part 9b, and Part 9d.

You could almost believe it's a deliberate joke. Part 9b at one point remarks that something called "the Antiversity is described more fully in the next post." Part 9d, meanwhile, opens by saying that it's going to provide directions on how to stage a fascist coup, but notes that "this coup design (which is not fascist, but reactionary) depends on the information weapon we've just designed—the Antiversity. If you don't have an Antiversity or anything like it, I'm afraid you'll need a different recipe." It's genuinely funny. Except that during the course of a site fundraiser two months after posting Part 9d, Moldbug explained the gap, saying that he was working on "a self-published book I'll be releasing in the next few months: *Motivation and Architecture of the Antiversity*. This started out as part 9c of the Gentle Introduction, but has become its own thing."[150] The fundraiser netted him just over four thousand dollars, but the book never materialized.

Still, this is in most regards no big deal; everyone's got unfinished projects. "You lack a detailed plan for action" has always been an unsatisfying critique of radical thought, and it does not expose any fractures in Moldbug that even approach the significance of those created by his childish order/chaos absolutism. Nevertheless, it marks a genuine failure, if not for Mencius Moldbug, then for Curtis Yarvin. The Antiversity is a technical problem he could not design a solution to that satisfied him. Even if it is not a large problem for his work, it is likely to be a revealing one.

So what was the Antiversity supposed to be? Well, most obviously it's a contrast to the university, which Moldbug continues to hate on the grounds that it is secretly a religion. It is also, as he boasts in Part 9b, "an independent producer of veracity—a truth service. It rests automatic confidence in no

other institution. Its goal is to uncover any truth available to it: both matters of fact and perspective. It needs to always be right and never be wrong. Where multiple coherent perspectives of an issue exist, the Antiversity must provide all—each composed with the highest quality available." And then once it has been constructed Moldbug proposes to ask it, "What is to be done? What is the sequel to the coup d'état? What is Plan B?"

Almost immediately this starts to get away from him. Once the Antiversity has solved the problem of what to do (in, and I quote, "a hundred-page report. Probably with a DVD-sized appendix"), it will of course have to continue existing in some fashion. "The Antiversity," he writes, "continues to guide the New Structure toward stability—acting as the brain of NUSG, just as the University acted as the brain of OUSG. However, where the University pretends to advise the Modern Structure but in reality directs it, the Antiversity pretends to advise the New Structure and in reality advises it." What's striking here is the degree to which, in his vision of this incorruptible replacement for the University, Moldbug has become a techno-eschatologist whose favored technology is political philosophy, contorting himself to believe in the necessary existence of some straightforwardly and self-evidently correct answer to the general problem of what should be done.

It's almost too obvious to point out that the general problem of what should be done seems an even longer shot for solvability than the halting problem. Of course Moldbug couldn't actually build the thing. No, what's really notable here is Moldbug's doe-eyed certainty that such a thing as an absolute truth service could be built; that there is a general plan of action so self-evidently compelling that if he only expressed it properly everyone would immediately flock to his side. In short, after thousands of words railing against the Cathedral for secretly being a religion, he's accidentally reinvented religion. And then lost the holy text. You couldn't parody it better.

Were we Mencius Moldbug, the trick at this point would be to declare that religion is a technology. We have no particular need of the definition-twisting necessary to make it work, however, and it would be a banal affair. Let us instead simply note that religion, broadly speaking, fits the bill for our objective of producing a vision of white culture that is at once productive and eschatological. One need only look at any historical culture to see that religions, like architectural ruins, are one of the means by which they haunt the future. This is exactly the thing we want to design.

Our goal is not, obviously, to finish Moldbug's work for him, not even in some monstrous or inverted form. The time for the Satanic is long past; the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. But it is also not simply

the embrace of the University that Moldbug rejects. The contemporary world is of value only because we are stuck within it. But we are surely past any arrogant assertions that the anthropocene is anything so straightforward as good or evil. There is nothing obvious to progress towards, little yet accelerate towards. Our biggest problem is that we're trapped on a rock surrounded by an infinite void circling a dying sun, and whatever faith we build, it will not be a solution to the general problem of what to do about that.

So Satanism's past its sell-by date and cosmic horror's a cliché. But we've seen that list within this labyrinth once before, albeit just in passing: Thacker's early exploration of black metal by way of setting up a quasi-dialectic (he uses the older medieval term of *quæstio*) between interpreting "black" as Satanic and interpreting it as pagan and synthesizing the options into cosmic horror. Which gives us a third term worth exploring.

Even by our standards this is tenuous, and yet the underlying imagery is consistent enough to support the move. Metal is as plausible a place as any to stage an analysis of white culture, it being a scene notoriously haunted with a white nationalist subculture. As, indeed, is the contemporary pagan community, which includes a white nationalist strain in the Nazi occultist tradition, of turning to European folklore to escape the corruption of Jew-tainted Christianity in amidst the NPR-listening Wiccans with artisan granola businesses. The pagan, meanwhile, fits nicely into our desire for a culture of ruins. As Thacker explains, in contrast with the Luciferian model, "Paganism denotes less a negative or reactive mode, than an entirely different, and ultimately pre-Christian outlook." Where Satanism works "through opposition and inversion," paganism "is related to the dominant framework of Christianity by exclusion and alterity."[151]

Thacker is uncharacteristically sloppy here—rolling back the Christianization of Europe may not be negative, but it's the very definition of reactionary, hence white nationalist paganism being a thing. And he gets badly ensnared in a set of reversals and elisions when he tries to set up a technology/nature divide between Satanism and paganism, contrasting the Black Mass of Satanism with the animistic and nature-heavy framework of paganism before saying, in rapid succession, that "the magician is less one who uses nature as a tool, and more like a conduit for magical forces," that "whereas in Satanism one finds an attempt to instrumentalize dark forces against light, in paganism magic is technology and vice-versa," and finally declaring, "in contrast to the dark technics of Satanism, then, the dark magic of paganism."[152] But messy suits us, or at least, this mess does. A certain

confusion over where technology ends and magic begins is rather the point of the exercise.

What appeals is not the mad folly of returning to the pre-Christian world, but the notion of a system that is lost, not so much driven underground as outright buried, that cannot possibly return but can at best be reconstructed, the seams and patches always visible, wearing its artifice as its sleeve. Our goal is not the magical revelation sought but not found by Moldbug. It is not Kleio, author of history. It is not even Gnon, Nick Land's meta-god of imminent reality. And it is certainly not an AI that will make us live forever. It's just a ghost story—a strange play of the light late in the long anthropocene night. And if, like any ghost story, it is a bit of a shaggy dog tale, well, history always is. Nobody gasses on like a victor.

This leaves a single thread of the labyrinth upon which we have not pulled, namely the work of William Blake. As mentioned, Blake was a literal visionary, which is to say that his art and poetry was directly inspired by visions. The strange cosmos he illuminates across what are generally referred to as his prophetic works, in other words, is not some mere fiction, nor even the sort of inspired adaptation of a religious tale that Milton offers. What Blake offers is nothing more nor less than a full-fledged religious system rooted in revelation as credible as any other. Moreover, he offers a system that is firmly rooted in white culture, emerging equally out of the British druidic tradition and the Christian Dissenter tradition Blake was raised within. An abandoned branch of white paganism, in other words, ripe for the haunting.

Blake's system begins with Urizen, depicted as an old man with long white hair and beard, deliberately echoing traditional depictions of the Christian God-the-Father. The name, as with many of Blake's mythological figures, is a pun—a homophone of "your reason," which points straightforwardly to Urizen's role in the system. He is a figure of precision—early in the eponymous *Book of Urizen* Blake describes him bringing the world into being by measuring it: "Times on times he divided, & measur'd / Space by space in his ninefold darkness." But he is also a lawgiver, writing a book "of eternal brass" that fixes the world into "One command, one joy one desire, / One curse, one weight, one measure / One King, one God, one Law."

Blake was, to say the least, not a fan. He railed against such fixity and uniformity, most famously in a letter in which he prayed, "May God us keep / From Single vision & Newtons sleep."[153] This is in many ways the most elemental and axiomatic principle in Blake: he reacts to single vision with the same furious terror that Moldbug reacts to chaos and Yudkowsky to bad math

teachers. As he put it in another oft-quoted bit, "I must Create a System. or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create."[154] And create he did, becoming both one of the great poets and visual artists of Britain; a voice it is impossible to imagine anything that deserves to be called "humanity" ever forgetting.

More pragmatically, Blake opposed Urizen with Los, a creator figure. Los appears in many forms throughout Blake's mythos, but in *The Book of Urizen* at least, he is a builder, depicted as a muscular man with a hammer. Horrified and in anguish at Urizen's dominion he launches into a furious act of creation, forging chains to bind Urizen. And yet Blake's myth is no simple tale of tyrannical reason and rebellious imagination. That would be too singular a vision for Blake. Instead Los's creation serves merely to give Urizen a material form, which is just as terrible and singular a prison as the cold darkness of Urizen's law. Los is struck dumb by the awful weight of what he is done, and is rent in two by his pity, creating Enitharmon, with whom he has a child, described as a "Worm" and revealed eventually to be Orc, the spirit of revolution within Blake's mythos.

It is important to realize that, structurally, Blake is riffing heavily on *Paradise Lost*, and thus more broadly the Book of Genesis—hence, for instance, Enitharmon splitting off from Los much as Eve is grown from Adam's rib. And instead of being tempted into sex and lust by the serpent they birth the serpent, who, as a literal embodiment of revolution, is even more Whiggish than the Devil. But more broadly, Blake has made his strange inversion of Milton almost entirely out of repetitions of Milton's basic dramatic act of the fall. Urizen splits himself out of Eternity through the act of self-definition, a re-enactment of Satan's fall through the existence of his own ego. This division in turn creates Los out of the remnant, who then falls in turn to create Enitharmon.

What's even more interesting, though, is that Los's fall occurs because of his reaction to gazing upon the material body that he has created for Urizen. Blake gives over a tremendous portion of the poem to meticulously describing the creation of this body in unsettlingly carnal terms—at one point, for instance, "In ghastly torment sick; / Within his ribs bloated round, / A craving Hungry Cavern; / Thence arose his channeld Throat, / And like a red flame a tongue / Of thirst & of hunger appeard."[155] To say the process humanizes Urizen is almost crudely literal. And then Los's reaction is explicitly Pity—Blake capitalizes the term, and uses it as the initial name for Enitharmon. So in

Blake's system the first fall comes from the recognition of the self, and the second comes from the recognition of the other—from empathy, if you will.

Another intriguing parallel arises in the idea that Urizen was severed from Eternity. This is another fundamental concept in Blake—his version of the Singularity, at once Day of Judgment and Big Bang. In essence, it is a notion of absolute simultaneity—a unity of all things in which there is no division of time, self, or other. (Those inclined to make cross-cultural connections will note that Blake's Eternity is not unlike the Australian Aboriginal notion of the Dreamtime, but we promised not to introduce new concepts.) Significantly, Blake's telling of this structure is never merely cyclical—even in his late epics like *Jerusalem* and the unfinished *Four Zoas* where Blake tells a tale stretching from creation to destruction, there is no sense that the return to Eternity at the end of creation constitutes a loop back to the start. But the resulting structure is at once hauntological and Weird, with dead gods lurking beneath the world waiting to emerge and futures speaking to the past through prophecy, and, moreover, these two events being indistinguishable and sliding freely from one to the other.

This highlights the more salient point about Eternity, which is that it allows Blake to avoid single vision within his own mythology. All of his prophetic works are tales of schism from Eternity, and reflect Eternity's nature through their variety. Or, in plainer terms, the prophetic works contradict each other left, right, and center. Indeed, they regularly contradict themselves, causing odd sequences such as in *The Book of Urizen*, where Los is introduced midway through Chapter III and then, a few lines later, it's casually mentioned that "Urizen was rent from his side," despite no mention or allusion to this when Urizen is introduced in the poem's first lines:

> Lo, a shadow of horror is risen
> In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific!
> Self-closd, all-repelling; what Demon
> Hath form'd this abominable void
> This soul-shudd'ring vacuum?—Some said
> "It is Urizen", But unknown, abstracted
> Brooding secret, the dark power hid.

This is not sloppy writing on Blake's part, but a deliberate attempt to create a world in which things have multiple simultaneous natures, where ambiguity is not a lack but a presence. Blake's world revises itself, just as he endlessly revised his illuminated manuscripts, rearranging pages and hand-painting each copy, making each singular so that the work as a whole could never be.

Similarly, aspects of his mythology are retold in other poems from different perspectives and with different results. *The Book of Urizen* tells of how Orc, the

spirit of revolution, is born of Los and Enitharmon and will come to oppose Urizen, but the confrontation never happens. The poem instead simply leaves off with the children of Urizen forgetting Eternity in a grotesque and inverted parody of the Book of Genesis ("Six days they shrunk up from existence / And on the seventh day they rested / And they bless'd the seventh day, in sick hope") and journeying out from Egypt to begin the process of history, Orc's fate entirely unresolved. The tale is instead picked up in *America a Prophecy*, the first poem in a separate mythological cycle engraved around the same time and collectively referred to as the Continental Prophecies.

America a Prophecy takes one of Blake's most radical approaches to mythology, entwining his pantheon with material history to retell the American Revolution with the blood and thunder of Ragnarok. The poem opens:

> The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly tent,
> Sullen fires across the Atlantic glow to America's shore:
> Piercing the souls of warlike men, who rise in silent night,
> Washington, Franklin, Paine & Warren, Gates, Hancock &
> Green;
>
> Meet on the coast glowing with blood from Albions fiery Prince.

Later, there are dragons. It's fucking metal.

But just as *The Book of Urizen* is not a straightforward tale of Los's triumph against Urizen's tyranny, *America a Prophecy* is no paean to the triumph of revolution. Indeed, it rivals Moldbug for the most pessimistic take on the American Revolution within our tale. Blake's account of the Revolution is of gradual corruption and decline, ultimately amounting to nothing. At first, as the prospect of revolution against the King of England (never named as George III due to Blake's fears of arrest and prosecution) washes over America there are scenes of rejoice. "The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk & dry'd. / Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing! Awakening! / Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds & bars are burst; / Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field: / Let him look into the heavens & laugh in the bright air." But after Orc announces himself to challenge Urizen and war breaks out things are altogether less idyllic—at one point Blake describes how "the plagues creep on the burning winds driven by flames of Orc." And at the end it is Urizen who remains in control, but the Revolution rumbles onward, Orc's fire consuming Europe. It is pessimistic in the extreme, offering only violence and turmoil.

Like Moldbug, then, Blake views revolution as a source of chaos and suffering; a well-intentioned pursuit that inevitably goes wrong. Admittedly Blake thinks it goes south in part because of the failure of the American Revolution to liberate the slaves whereas Moldbug sighs wistfully at the idea of

a well-run plantation, but then, Blake has dragons too. It doesn't mean there aren't significant similarities. No, the big difference is that Blake sees revolution as inadequate, not misguided. For Blake, revolution is an intermediate step, historically inevitable but incomplete; the Continental Prophecies end in "Asia" (one of two poems within *The Song of Los*, the other, "Africa," being a prequel to *America a Prophecy*) with a spiritual resurrection that emerges from Orc and Urizen's final clash—a resurrection of the dead that ends with Urizen weeping as the Grave itself becomes a character in the poem, shrieking and coming alive, the poem ending with a description of how "Her bosom swells with wild desire: / And milk & blood & glandous wine." ("Glandous" is a word of Blake's own invention, serving to emphasize the carnal nature of the Grave's awakening.) Less revolution than revelation.

Blake told the tale again from a different vantage point, and with a slight change to the casting, in *The Book of Ahania*, composed the same year as *The Song of Los*. Here the figure is not named Orc but Fuzon, one of Urizen's children established at the end of *The Book of Urizen,* and associated with fire (the four children of Urizen lining up with the four classical elements). His description at the poem's start thus closely mirrors Orc's in *America a Prophecy*, focusing on his flaming and terrible visage, and like Orc he leads a rebellion against Urizen. But inasmuch as Fuzon embodies revolution he is its most fallen form, lacking all traces of grace or nobility. Fuzon is nothing more than a rebellious son transgressing against the father, seeing Urizen as weak and seeking to rule in his place. In fact Urizen dispatches him brutally—he kills Fuzon mere moments after Fuzon triumphantly proclaims himself "God… eldest of things" late in the second of five chapters, and spends the third chapter nailing his corpse to the Tree of Mystery.

Instead Fuzon's rebellion is the occasion for the creation of the eponymous Ahania, who is rent from Urizen during Fuzon's initial attack, withering away when Urizen spurns and rejects her. In the poem's final chapter, however, the focus returns to her, closing with an extended recounting of her lament in the face of her separation and torment. It is, in many ways, an even more pessimistic ending than Orc's faltering at the end of *America a Prophecy* or Urizen's dominion at the close of *The Book of Urizen*; certainly the anguish of her monologue is one of the most affecting parts of Blake's work.

Ahania is not the first feminine figure to be cleaved from a male one that we have seen; there is already Enitharmon's creation out of Los, explored minimally in *The Book of Urizen*, but a key concept in the mythology all the same. Like Ahania she is a sympathetic figure—indeed explicitly, defined at first out of Los's pity for the newly material Urizen. And yet in *Europe a*

Prophecy, the second of the Continental Prophecies, she fuses with Orc and brings about a centuries-long reign of darkness upon Europe, which is to say that her "goodness" is as ambiguous as anyone else's. But for Ahania the balance is different; instead of becoming an inverted power like Enitharmon, Ahania is largely powerless, denied true form, depicted as a mere shadow.

And yet for all her impotence she offers the most compelling alternative to Urizen's dark enlightenment that we have seen thus far in Blake. Ahania is a force of pleasure—tellingly, she splits off from Urizen's loins, and his rejection of her emerges out of jealousy. She, meanwhile, speaks of a lost joy, and of how her joy would "awaken" Urizen, transforming him from tyrannical builder to a farmer bringing forth a bountiful harvest. And yet this pleasure goddess (the phrase is gag-worthy, yet accurate) is inextricably associated with and fundamentally springs from a figure of reason and abstracted intellect. This is not some nerd bimbo fantasy, of course; Ahania instead represents a sort of idyllic unity of humanity not unlike what Land describes in *Phyl-Undhu* as the prehistory of the fallen virtual world, when "men mingled freely with gods at the edge of Heaven" and when 'delight, learning, and work were indistinct," a time that ends with "Scission." As with Land, this is a state lost to our fallen world, but its presence both haunts the world and offers it redemption.

And indeed, just as Los, Orc, Enitharmon, and Ahania fail to be unalloyed and straightforward heroes, so does Urizen fail to ever quite be a villain, even as Blake rails endlessly against him. The description of his books of single vision is a grim joke—their composition of "eternal brass" evoking the copper plates upon which Blake's own work was created. Urizen's method of endless precision is self-critique—Blake confronting his own propensity for endless revision and adjustment, and the way in which he insisted on translating his radical and immediate visions into laborious and precise artistic representations. If the cold tyranny of reason could not be redeemed, neither could Blake himself.

(If both Los and Urizen are to be taken as avatars of Blake—and the case for Los is straightforward—then it would in turn suggest that both Ahania and Enitharmon should be read as analogues of his wife, Catherine. The latter is a common reading; the former, despite being more moving given the idea of Urizen's redemption, less so. In a tale without enough women, however, Catherine Blake is worth alighting upon briefly, as she is a fascinating character. They met while he was reeling from a failed previous relationship, and when he asked her if she pitied him and she said yes, he proclaimed his love for her. She was illiterate—her signature on their wedding contract is simply an X—but Blake taught her to read and write over the course of their

marriage. Through his life, which had all the difficulties one would imagine of an artist and prophet who insisted on hand-coloring and hand-selling his work in tiny limited editions, she was a constant source of support, unwavering in her belief in him and his visions. Blake discusses her directly in *Milton a Poem*, addressing the spirit Ololon who has come to visit him, "Virgin of Providence fear not to enter into my Cottage / What is thy message to thy friend: What am I now to do / Is it again to plunge into deeper affliction? Behold me / Ready to obey, but pity thou my Shadow of Delight / Enter my Cottage, comfort her, for she is sick with fatigue." It is, for my money, one of the most moving passages in all of English literature.)

There is a conceptual shift here that is vital to the development of Blake's mythology over his career, from the idea of opposing reason to redeeming it. Indeed, the shift in effect draws a curtain over two phases of his career. His two most-read works, both non-prophetic illuminated manuscripts from his early career, are *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, both of which, as their titles suggest, deal with relatively straightforward binaries. Blake complicates both, as he does his various binary oppositions to Urizen, but his starting point is the idea of straightforward opposition. And this is an explicit theme of the period—he outright says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." (It is notable that Blake is more or less pre-inventing the Hegelian dialectic here, though he's hardly the first; c.f. the *quaestio*.)

But in the dying days of the eighteenth century, Blake changed focus. He finished the expansion of *Songs of Innocence* into its final form in 1794, spent 1795 wrapping up the two myth cycles he'd begun with *America a Prophecy* and *The Book of Urizen* (all with considerably shorter and less artistically ornate works that hint at his changing interests), and did not complete another illuminated or prophetic work for sixteen years, although he worked on three over the course of that period, ultimately finishing two (*Milton a Poem* in 1811 and *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion* in 1820) and leaving a third incomplete (*Vala*, aka *The Four Zoas*, abandoned in 1807). Where his early prophetic works were relatively short—the longest, *The Book of Urizen*, is twenty-eight pages, eleven of which are illustrations and many others of which are dominated by their art—his latter three are vast epics—*Milton* is fifty pages, *Jerusalem* a hundred, and both are dominated by pages of full text with lightly illustrated borders.

This sudden expansion in his work's complexity is mirrored by the underlying mythology, which began expanding rapidly to encompass

possibilities beyond mere Contraries. His early works had presented an opposition to Urizen, found it inadequate, then stumbled, unable to progress beyond attempting to re-envision the encounter—to look again in search of some "right" answer. Starting with *The Four Zoas*, however, his system broadened. Los is reworked as the fallen form of a greater being, Urthona, and his dualism with Urizen is reframed as a quadrism, with the pair joined by Luvah, representing passion and love (it's another bad Blake pun), and Tharmas, representing the physical body, and specifically sensation.

The Zoas are, collectively, the fallen form of primeval and perfected man, whom he names Albion after one of the ancient names for Britain. And Blake ties them to the land itself, ascribing for each a directional correspondence: Tharmas is West, Urizen South, Luvah East, and Urthona North. And just as Los/Urthona and Urizen have their female counterparts—called now Emanations—so do Tharmas and Luvah. Tharmas's is named Enion (note the back formation of Enitharmon's name; she is indeed their child even as she is also Los's Emanation), who represents sexual desire, while Luvah's counterpart is Vala, who focuses his passion into eroticized warfare, and who sparks a conflict between Luvah and Urizen that is, in the new telling of the myth, the reason for Urizen's fall.

Here the system quickly grows unwieldy. Orc is repositioned as the fallen form of Luvah, just as Los is of Urthona—a fascinating equation, not least because Luvah is also positioned as analogous to Christ (though so is Los at one point). Albion acquires his own Emanation, Jerusalem, who is Liberty, and finds himself torn between her and the temptations of Vala (now her fallen form as opposed to Luvah's Emanation). Milton departs Heaven and voluntarily falls to Earth to redeem his own religious errors, visiting Blake to be reunited with his own lost feminine aspect. Ahania is exposed to sexuality in the form of Enion by Los and Enitharmon, becoming sinful in Urizen's eyes, only to be partially reunited with him in the Last Judgment, still bound to a Persephone-like cycle of annual death and rebirth. Los attempts to construct a city of imagination, Golgonooza. Time fractures and folds in on itself so that Blake's London and ancient Jerusalem (which is still also Albion's Emanation) become one. It is a dizzying tangle that Blake himself never quite unwound; a cosmology that visibly confounded its sole prophet.

This is not, of course, to say that there is nothing of value in these later works. For one thing, even if Blake found himself lost within the labyrinth of his own cosmology, that doesn't mean it is not a fascinating journey. More than that, however, it's simply a good cosmology. The underlying Imagination/Reason dualism is compelling; a distinction well-founded in

culture and thought that is nevertheless not one upon which any other famous cosmology has been built. The four Zoas are recognizable cousins of pagan and esoteric structures, but removed enough to not quite have straightforward equivalences in any other mythology. They have that marvelous feature of the best gods: perfectly answering a question you didn't know you had. Patriarchal authorities abound in myth, but the tyrant geometer Urizen is unlike any other; war goddesses are common, but few make their erotic fantasy the explicit point as Vala does. And a few, such as Ahania, are genuinely breathtaking in their scope: a pleasure goddess representing intellectual curiosity who is bound in a Persephone-like structure of death and rebirth is a metaphysical/literary construct to rival Milton's Satan, and one Blake barely scratches the surface of. These are gods worth trafficking with, and given that, the fact that their prophet-creator left so much unfinished business can hardly be called a fault.

Indeed, there are not really any concepts we have encountered thus far within this labyrinth that cannot be grappled with through Blake. Urizen is an even more brutal satire of Moldbug than Satan was; the Cathedral self-evidently exactly what Blake means when he has Urizen bind the world in the Web of Religion. Yudkowsky's AI heaven is a sci-fi Golgonooza, the fourfold City of Imagination, the Jerusalem Blake imagined built in England's green and pleasant land built instead of silicon and glass. Even Gnon, Land's mad and howling anti-God, is easily framed as a fallen form of Tharmas, the material world reduced to its brutal edge alone; the match is solid down to the mellifluous pairing of Gnon and Orc as counterparts. (Gnon is even a bad pun—an acronym for God of Nature Or Nature.) Even the more sympathetic concepts have their clear mirrors. Enitharmon works compellingly as an embodiment of empathy, which serves as an irreducible possibility of redemption surviving even the longest night of human suffering. There can be few writers who capture a sense of fundamental repulsion and horror at the notion of identity as vividly as Blake and Ligotti. And as monstrous wonders go, well, you're spoiled for choice, but I'll go ahead and step outside the prophetic works to simply say "fearful symmetry." Indeed, while Yudkowsky, whose taste in literature seems to exclude anything written above an eighth grade level, can perhaps be forgiven for not considering Blake, for Moldbug to miss Blake's preemptive refutation of his entire worldview is a genuine oversight.

But more significant are the things within Blake's vision that do not have easy correspondences, good or bad. These include, of course, many of the figures we've already identified as compelling. Vala, for instance, who is in one form "a hungry Stomach & a devouring Tongue. / Her Hand is a Court of

Justice, her Feet two Armies in Battle / Storms & Pestilence in her Locks: & in her Loins Earthquake. / And Fire. & The Ruin of Cities & Nations & Families & Tongues," and in another a "nameless shadowy Vortex" who is also an archer "Crown'd with a helmet & dark hair" but unable to speak due to her tongue being made of iron, has no obvious analogues. Perhaps Vauung, Nick Land's monstrous war, but his conception of it is drenched in language, Vala oppressed under Urizen, utterly devoid of her libidinous glamour.

And while Enitharmon represents the capacity for empathy that Turing identifies as the heart of what it is to be a person, Turing ultimately seeks how to represent and identify that capacity. He may stop short of Yudkowsky's ridiculous attempt to systematize empathy into decision theory, but it is still empathy as understood by algorithm. Enitharmon is more—born of pity so deep it cracked Los's being in two, and most famously depicted in Blake's painting *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy* as a dark-haired maiden face of a triple goddess sitting unmolested in a tiny glowing circle within a night of strange and fantastic beasts. Turing's paper stops at ESP.

And speaking of Yudkowsky, while Ahania may recognizably be the fuel that drives his quest for an AI god, he is only ever capable of recognizing her as an object. There are few aspects of *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* so disappointing as its treatment of Hermione, who, by temperament, ought fit Yudkowsky's interpolation of Rowling perfectly, and yet is instead left as a curiosity—a beloved relic of Rowling's naive fantasy never quite allowed to prove that she's better-adapted to rationality than Harry is to Magic. Instead she's capriciously killed (indeed, literally fridged) near the book's denouement, then brought back to life by Voldemort to give everything a utopian ending.

It is at this point necessary to note that in all three of these examples the nearest analogue to Blake's concept has stumbled in the face of its overt femininity. And perhaps further to admit that this is generally where Blake himself becomes ensnared in his later mythology, tripping over how to handle the feminine just as he had over his early dualisms. We ought not find this surprising, of course; it has been a known flaw of the conceptual terrain we've encircled for some time. But it is revealing. If the racial other was, in the end, a bridge too far for white culture—too much a step into utopia—then the female might prove a more immediately useful step. White culture's global domination allows for a myth of purity to exist. But there is no way to declare women to exist outside. That is not to say they cannot be oppressed—that this narrative could be constructed largely in their absence is evidence enough that they are second class subjects of the white empire. But their oppression is always going to resemble anti-Semitism more than anti-black racism.

Obviously it is different from both, working largely in a logic of objectification bundled with the old Miltonian "woman as man's weakness" bullshit. But while they may be penned into a virgin/whore complex within white culture, they are at least inextricably within white culture.

At this juncture it is in some ways impossible to avoid at least fleeting mention of Eliezer Yudkowsky's pastiche of the Japanese light novel form, *A Girl Corrupted by the Internet is the Summoned Hero?!*, simply because it is in material point of fact just about the only exception to the "there really aren't any women dealt with in all of this" observation. There is, to be clear, lots wrong with it, starting with its main character—a woman named Yuuki Yugano, whose sole interest is depraved Internet pornography, is summoned to a magical realm while she's in the middle of masturbating; it ends with her acquiring Satan himself as a sex slave through a combination of decision theory and depravity. Yuuki is firmly an object in the narrative—a fetish object mashed up inscrutably with Yudkowsky's peculiar brand of "rationality" and set loose on an unsuspecting genre. It's at best cringingly awkward and at worst horrifyingly sexist.

And yet it is oddly hard to hate, especially in the larger context. Certainly it's preferable to another rambling Moldbug post about how racism is secretly wonderful. And it's hard not to suggest that the world would be a better place if Yudkowsky had stuck to children's literature for adult geeks as opposed to starting a weird AI cult that derails efforts to curtail malaria. But the issue is not even that fiction is preferable to theory (that would be kind of awkward at this point, actually); I dare say *A Girl Corrupted by the Internet is the Summoned Hero?!* is in genuine ways better than *Phyl-Undhu* as well. This is not true on technical grounds; *Phyl-Undhu* is a far more artful and intelligent work. But there is an unexpected sweetness to its unapologetic perversity. Yudkowsky is (ironically) not always the most self-aware of people, but there is no way to seriously suggest that he is not in on the joke implicit in him publishing an erotic comedy novelette. The story may be objectifying, but the exaggerated innocence of the light novel form keeps it from becoming exploitatively gross (indeed, Yuuki starts and ends the story as a virgin), whereas it's difficult to ignore the fact that *Phyl-Undhu* goes out of its way to make fun of the suggestion that neoreaction is "fascist."

There is a sense of joy in Yudkowsky's story, in other words, that comes from its erotic content, and this is a good thing. It would be a better thing if this sense of joy were less framed in the utter banality of what passes for mainstream pornography, but again, it's not a creepy cult that lost its shit over a thought experiment, and in context that's a result. But much like empathy

(which is, let's face it, not entirely unrelated to eroticism), it's a starting point. Something much more reminiscent of a way forward exists in Blake, who is, if we're going to remain in the immediate vernacular of the erotic, clearly into some messed up fucking shit.

But for all Blake's promise, as mentioned, he stumbles. The erotic possibility of Blake is a constant undercurrent that bursts through in patches like roots through a sidewalk, and indeed part of the joy of his mythology is pointedly that it is not the basis for any creepy cults, but in the end the same banalities that doom Yudkowsky apply. His perversities are limitations, not launchpads—snares in which he is entangled and cannot quite escape. Women are problems; glorious, at times worshipped, but still, ultimately, objects rather than subjects.

We ought not be entirely surprised; white culture has sealed off this exit just as thoroughly as any other. (The Cracker Factory is real.) But by this point the countermove is equally obvious. With no way out, turn within. Which, let's face it, the erotic often does. But let's skip the easy masturbation metaphor and try instead to genuinely use the erotic as a launchpad, seeing how far we can actually go towards escaping the jaws of the fast-approaching monstrous end. Not sex, but what sex represents. After all, the transgressive brilliance of Blake is hardly restricted to his more overtly erotic moments. It is his entire vision that compels. What shines and animates the work is its furious insistence of it all; those parts that are straightforwardly erotic are, in the end, merely the domain of one Emanation of one Zoa. All of it demands to be seen, and Blake, ever the good prophet, obliges. Perhaps, then, not so much a decision to look within or without as around. Behind, above, down, any direction that is not forward. We know what's waiting for us there, after all.

How might our three Great Heroes of white culture appear if Blake's gaze were to turn upon them? If he were called out from Eternity to judge how Albion has fared in his absence, what would he think of Yudkowsky, Moldbug, and Land? I do not think he would find them unsympathetic. Blake did not fully embrace the heroic, but he did not reject it, and their sense of themselves as great men carrying a torch forward into darkness would have appealed to him, however perversely. Still, it is hard to imagine Moldbug or Yudkowsky registering as anything more than thralls of Urizen, their vision constricted utterly by his Net of Religion. Sympathetic, but no more so than any of the other fettered and tormented figures that dot Blake's visionary landscape. Land is fleetingly more interesting, but then, like Milton, was never really the hero of his tale—merely a fellow visionary. His menagerie of horrors is worthy of a glance, his awareness that he's of the devil's party even worth a respectful nod.

But were Blake to put his pen to capturing one of Land's monsters, it would be interesting more for having been seen by Blake than for the mere flea's ghost it is. For all their bombast, then, and all the weird and spectral horrors found within their labyrinth, they are but a tiny, glinting bit of golden thread stitched within a tapestry far more grandiose and monstrous.

What, after all, does Land threaten in the end? That history will be brutal? That there will be war and death and horror? Do we really imagine that Blake did not already know this? This is a man who bore witness to Vala's corruption of Albion, to the American Revolution's collapse into Orc's fury, who had not a pop industry in his head but a pantheon of gods and monsters. Do we really think he would even blink at these revelations? Of course the enlightenment was dark and teeming with unfathomable and nameless terrors. Enlightenment belongs to Urizen, after all.

But Urizen is redeemable. No, more than that, Urizen contains his redemption within the fractal depths of contradictions and revisions that are his very being, first among them his Emanation, Ahania, who recognizes that darkness exists only to be delved into—who does so herself, over and over again in her endless cycle of death and return.

From this, there can only be mysteries. We keep track of the walls, trying to count turns and forks, but through all of this we assumed it was a maze. We had not considered that we might have simply been walking in within a small grove of trees, our hands tracing circles around their trunks, our train of thought unknowingly stuck in a loop that cannot possibly halt. The forest is big, and our torch is small, yes. But this does not matter. Even the tiny portion we have mapped is enough to know that forbidden trees are for exploring. We go onwards. We have no choice. But if we're going in circles, that means that the monster is not, in fact, waiting ahead of us, but…

And now the moment of terror. The inevitable punchline. Its gaze upon us, hot and wet like breath on our neck and blood in our veins. It is here, and charging, and now. The fundamental instinct applies: the only question we have ever known to ask: what follows from this? How do we react?

Bioterrorist, infect thyself.

The Blind All-Seeing Eye of Gamergate

One measures a circle starting anywhere, so let's pick up where we left off. Vox Day, who got in on the ground floor, back when it was still called the Quinnspiracy, begins his description like this, in the first of two chapters five:

> In 2012, a fat and unattractive woman with blue hair and numerous piercings decided to play at being a 'game designer.' She plugged forty thousand words into the Twine engine, a hypertext tool that allows people without any knowledge of programming to create interactive fiction games similar to *Zork* and other text adventures circa 1977, combined it with a ten-second piano loop, and called it a game.

It's ironic that the book should be called *SJW's Always Lie*, because he lies right there. He lies when he uses the same disaffected tone of factual declaration for "a hypertext tool that allows people without any knowledge of programming to create interactive fiction games similar to *Zork* and other text adventures circa 1977" and "a fat and unattractive woman with blue hair and numerous piercings," as though these are both straightforward truths in the same way. He lies when he shifts the definition of game throughout; one moment she is a faux "game designer," the next the not-games she not-designs are defined straightforwardly in terms of an iconic piece of gaming history. (And he gets it wrong for good measure; *Zork* was a parser game, not a hypertext.)

Day tears into the game at length—a critical savaging: "It's even less fun than it sounds"; "soul-drainingly boring and more than three decades technologically out-of-date"; "I have never played a less entertaining computer game." He brings a gun to a knife-fight, eviscerating the game with a level of contempt that raises the question of why he even gives a shit about it if it's so self-evidently unworthy of attention. Of particular note; his citation of its 1.8 score on Metacritic, based on 308 ratings.

Eventually he reaches his point, saying that the game was a complete irrelevancy until "August 2014, when an upset young man who had finally broken it off with his cheating girlfriend created a WordPress blog called *The Zoe Post* that documented, in excruciating detail, his experience of having loved and lost." Supposedly the designer of this game cheated on a guy with some people who wrote for some websites that had mentioned the game in articles at some point. From this he casually spins out a conspiracy theory: "Given the very poor quality of *Depression Quest*, it seemed readily apparent to casual observers that the unusual amount of media attention garnered by the game must have been the result of the developer's liberal distribution of her sexual favors."

At this point, three pages into the chapter (entitled "Counterattack"), Vox Day makes a stunning reversal, admitting that "this does not appear to have exactly been the case." And no wonder. The "very poor quality of *Depression Quest*" is, after all, a point offered on the evidence that Vox Day does not like it and it has a 1.8 score on MetaCritic. It is, however, worth noting that 307 of those 308 reviews on MetaCritic came in August of 2014 or later. In other words, the proof that the game is bad—a premise upon which all of the subsequent venom that he is about to justify depends—is a consequence of the very venom it justifies. The serpent eats its own tail.

Vox Day finds it amazing as well. "And that's when everything started to get truly weird," he says, and he's honestly not wrong. Here's how he puts it:

> Game journalists reacted to the gaming public's attacks on the game media by lining up solidly behind *Depression Quest* and its neophyte female developer. Unexpectedly, so did 4chan, a popular site with a sizable gaming contingency that had previously been ground zero for anything-goes channer culture. As charges of ethical lapses and corruption were thrown at the game journalists, accusations of death threats, sexual harassment, and doxxing were hurled right back at the gamers criticizing *Depression Quest*, its developer, and two notorious attention-seeking SJW fame whores.

It's not so much weird as Weird, a writhing mass of deception and tangled prose, monstrous and malignant, that evades all attempts to actually derive meaning or indeed factual reality from it. The transition from "game journalists" to "4chan" elides the fact that by "4chan" he means the owners of the website 4chan.org, as opposed to the "anything-goes channer culture" of the site's community. Similarly, the list of "gamers criticizing *Depression Quest*, its developer, and two notorious attention-seeking SJW fame whores" contains a sudden swerve from one side of this embittered feud to the other, without a moment to stop and explore what was actually happening on the ground.

Mere sentences later, and with no explanation, there are three SJWs, "Literally Who, Literally Who 2, and Literally Wu," named so to make "the

point that neither they nor their identities were relevant to the larger point of corruption in game journalism." Despite the apparent irrelevancy of their identities (a point that's rather belied by the fact that "Literally Wu" contains the subject's surname), he emphasizes that they are "professional agitators" before talking about how Literally Who 2 and Literally Wu got mentioned in the *New York Times* and *Playboy* "after they followed Literally Who's lead by claiming to have also been driven from their homes by similarly non-existent death threats." There are no obvious grammatical antecedents to "also" and "similarly," nor is any evidence proffered of the non-existence of these death threats. No matter; he transitions, in the next paragraph, to how "things heated up rapidly in the second half of August 2014" over at *Ars Technica, Gamasutra, The Guardian, The Financial Post, Jezebel*, and other sites. This marks another spectacular dishonesty: the *New York Times* and *Playboy* pieces post-date August 2014, rather than being causes of these events. And it is at this point in the discussion that "#GamerGate" gets introduced. Vox Day is 100% for it.

But more than the structure of constant lies and obfuscations that constitutes Vox Day's argument, it is the petty sadism that stands out. From the opening pen portrait, with "fat and unattractive" as the first two adjectives used, almost every detail seems picked for its cruelty. It is not the degree of sadism that is striking—in truth it doesn't particularly stand out among people shouting on the Internet. Nor is it the further disingenuity revealed—the nominal audience of the book is ordinary people worried about getting in trouble with their boss because they made an off-color joke or something, and yet its content is specifically tailored to Gamergate insiders who will appreciate the jabs. By this point it should already be clear that there are going to be lies all over the place. What's striking is simply the fact that nobody commits such finely worked, labored over cruelty out of anything other than raw and searing hatred. (I should know.) So what is it? What drives Vox Day to be so incandescently furious about a little browser game? Or, perhaps less psychoanalytically, what does he consider the stakes here to be?

Well, he commissioned illustrations for *SJWs Always Lie* from a cartoonist working under the pen name Red Meat (no relation to Max Cannon's classic webcomic), with whom he also did a brief series of editorial cartoons with on his blog. The first one is called "Mount Gamergate." It depicts a young girl sitting on a rail gesturing up at a Mount Rushmore-esque carving of five faces. "Who are those guys, Dad?" she asks a smiling white man with an afro. "That's Sargon, Milo and Adam, the Internet Aristocrat, and Ralph, honey." And then the kicker—"Five great men who helped save western civilization!"

On the one hand, you can't say it doesn't answer the question. On the other, it's madness.


WHO ARE THOSE GUYS, DAD?
THAT'S SARGON, MILO AND ADAM, THE INTERNET ARISTOCRAT, AND RALPH, HONEY.
FIVE GREAT MEN WHO HELPED SAVE WESTERN CIVILIZATION!

A specific sort, even—the paranoid short-circuit of the conspiracy theory. Its signature move is displayed over and over again in *SJWs Always Lie*, easily discernible in the path we've traced so far: a stunning conclusion that's always one reach, one crucial missing step away from being pinned down. This chain of implication from Eron Gjoni to the fate of western civilization is awe-inspiring in its scope, and yet visibly does not hold, stitched together with nothing but cruelty and insinuation, disintegrating faster the more one stares at its details.

Can this even be said to constitute a weakness in the beast? The same tendency towards cognitive discorporation is, after all, a first line of defense, a move encapsulated in the evasion of "Literally Who." Even Vox Day, a man whose first post on the Quinnspiracy came on August 21st, 2014, less than a week after the Zoe post, whose blog still says #gamergate at the top, who has worked with Roosh V and Mike Cernovich, and who has a documented history of using Internet abuse as misogynistic right-wing activism somehow

remains an object of plausible deniability, the possibility of his influence a thing any Gator knows to disavow instinctively, without further reflection. Just like any abuse and harassment was done by some other Gamergate. Indeed, the movement is consciously organized around this defense. It's nominally leaderless; as Vox Day says in an interview, quoting a then-popular slogan, "I'm the leader of Gamergate and so can you."

Such is the logic of the savior of western civilization himself, the Internet Aristocrat, whose video expose of Zoe Quinn was cited in the Adam Baldwin tweet that renamed it Gamergate. Over and over again, the video blazes past claims with scant or ludicrous evidence. Take his account of Eron Gjoni. The video explains that he's Zoe Quinn's ex-boyfriend, and that he made an "extraordinarily long" bloglist that consists entirely of "a laundry list of complaints as to why the relationship failed and why he's upset. Now," the Aristocrat declares, "These all seem to be valid to me. Things like lying and manipulation and infidelity, however at face value it's nothing more than that."

This last phrase exerts an obvious pull. An ex-boyfriend has put a lengthy laundry list of grievances on the Internet. This seems pathologically vengeful—its face value specifically low, its accusations projections. Gjoni even admits as much—look at the start of his post: "This is written almost entirely in shitty metaphors and bitter snark. It's a post about an ex, and the tone reflects its intention as the starting post for forum threads entitled Cringe-Worthy Break Up Stories on *Penny Arcade* and *Something Awful*, because I figured it would be best to announce on friendly communities in innocuous ways. *Penny Arcade* and *Something Awful* deleted those threads, so now this blog stands alone. I will not take it down, because I know the information is important." The post's tone of wounded self-righteousness nauseates. He makes up sniggering nicknames for her, dumps turgid piles of private correspondence, all in a naked effort at revenge. It reeks of selective narrative. You can see immediately why its victim would want it to go away, and if (as alleged) she filed a slightly spurious DMCA complaint against a YouTube video talking about them (the incident that nominally prompts the Internet Aristocrat's video, more on which in a moment), well, like cheating on this asshole, it would be hard not to forgive her. Hell, even the Internet Aristocrat can understand why Zoe Quinn might be reacting badly to this post. He ponders it as an alternative: "Is she taking the videos down because she's embarrassed about it?"

Pause here and consider the chain of implications. A dodgy-as-hell revenge piece against a woman is trusted on a warrant as flimsy as "these all seem to be valid to me." Now the most obvious explanation imaginable is entertained for this phenomenon—a default assumption with explanatory power so thorough

the mind reels to imagine what could possibly unseat it. How does the Aristocrat proceed? "No. She's taking them down because of the people she slept with—that she *cheated on him with* during the relationship and who they are, and specifically what they can do for her as an entrepreneur. Gaming journalism has reached a low point."

There's no pause there. Just a cut to the barrister-wigged avatar the Aristocrat uses when he monologues in the video. That's the extent to which this claim is justified, which is to say with nothing more than an angry emphasis on "cheated on him with." (Actually, it appears they broke up and got back together, but Gjoni elides that fact, starting the movement as it meant to go on.) And the transition is bonkers.

But that's nothing to what's trotted out to support the claim about video game journalism. "Over the last five years. It started with pieces that had nothing to do with gaming or game reviews, nothing to do with software or hardware, nothing to do with events or expos." This last phrase is uttered with a screenshot of a *Kotaku* article with the headline, "The Games At E3 2014 Sure Had A Lot of Dudes (Like Always)." E3 being the Electronic Entertainment Expo. "Gaming or game reviews," meanwhile, contains a *Kotaku* repost of John Scalzi's blog post "Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is," a piece that is, in point of fact, built around an extended metaphor rooted in gaming.

The Aristocrat continues: "It started to travel off into the areas of social justice and feminism" ("Three Words I Said to the Man I Defeated in *Gears of War* That I'll Never Say Again") "and opinion pieces and op-eds that had *nothing* to do with gaming" ("Playing with privilege: the invisible benefits of gaming while male"). These are, in fact, all self-evidently about gaming. Perhaps not straightforward reviews, but surely part of journalism, as easily located within a historical tradition of Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe, who pioneered the journalistic approach of throwing yourself into the event and writing about it, or one of Karl Marx and William F. Buckley who reported from strong and explicit political perspectives.

Even the claim of "the last five years" is nonsense. It's a style that's been around since the turn of the millennium, in pieces like Tweety's classic tale of the experience of being a volunteer *EverQuest* guide "Try Being a Guide You Nutless Assmuncher" back in 2000, or in *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* founder Kieron Gillen's 2004 manifesto "The New Games Journalism." It's the style that was on display in the seminal *The Rantings of Lum the Mad* since the heyday of *Ultima Online*. I should know—I wrote for the site in 2001 after Lum got hired on for *Dark Age of Camelot*. This has always been a part of video game

culture, and it always will be, just like it is in the culture of journalism and criticism in every other significant medium. And yet all of this history is erased by the Internet Aristocrat in a strange and nonsensical claim about games journalism, itself presented as an unjustified alternate explanation of a woman's perfectly understandable response to a pathologically vicious hit piece.

And all those lies and errors are packed into just one minute of the video. It's all like this. "I don't care," he says, "that Zoe Quinn fucked five guys," mere moments after his conscious, angry stressing of the fact that she cheated on Gjoni, the image cutting to an image of the restaurant Five Guys, in reference to Gjoni's mocking nickname for her, emphasizing the very care he denies. A few minutes later, he casually refers to someone as "another person who, might I add, *fucked* her way into a position," emphasis entirely his. When he gets around to asserting actual corruption—"a *massive* flaw in the fifth estate"—all he's got is the fact that one of the people Gjoni accuses Quinn of cheating on him with is Nathan Grayson, who he flatly accuses of being "someone who has published positive pieces about Zoe's game, who has given her publicity, and who has marketed her product *while having sex with her*" (always the emphasis on the sex bits) "and not disclosing it." And this publicity? Two pieces, one in January and one in March of 2014, both before the dates Gjoni accuses her of sleeping with him, and neither of them accurately described as "positive pieces about" *Depression Quest*. There's no substance to the accusation at all. And yet the Aristocrat goes on and on about it for twenty-five minutes, getting angrier and angrier as he goes, demanding that people be called "to the fucking mat" for these non-existent transgressions. It's a fractal cesspool of spurious malice.

But let's look at the beginning of the video—the instigating incident that the Internet Aristocrat cites to justify all of this—that Zoe Quinn supposedly filed a DMCA complaint against a YouTube video that included a fleeting screenshot of *Depression Quest*. The complaint, which the YouTuber, MundaneMatt, screenshotted and posted, is a bafflingly unprofessional thing —the company name is listed as "The Quinnspiracy," and both legal name and job position are filled in as "zoe quinn," lack of capitalization in the original. The postal and e-mail addresses are blacked out, which is on the one hand a rare concession towards not cavalierly targeting people for harassment and on the other makes it impossible to know if they're actually Zoe Quinn's.

I bring this last point up because, well, here's the thing. There's a guy named Andrew Auernheimer who goes by the name of "weev" online. Auernheimer's one of the few Internet trolls ever to manage to attain

Wikipedia-level notability primarily by being a complete asshole to people. And one of his tactics, first used in 2007 against game designer Kathy Sierra, is accusations of fake DMCA notices. Now, to be clear, Aurnheimer hadn't appeared on the Gamergate scene at the time of the Internet Aristocrat's video; he didn't proclaim his support for the movement until August of 2015. My point is merely that it's a known tactic for harassing female game developers. Fake DMCA notices are really easy to do, especially on YouTube, where most companies file them by bot, with scads of false positives. YouTube's approach is basically to automatically suspend a video when an even semi-credible one comes in and let the uploader assert fair use or whatever to get it put back up, a claim that's generally rubberstamped if it's at all reasonable. It's a dead-easy way to make a small ruckus—file a fake DMCA notice, then cry censorship about it and watch people rush to your defense.

In other words, Zoe Quinn probably never filed a DMCA takedown notice. Just like she didn't get any favorable media coverage in exchange for sexual favors. Or, in all likelihood, ever cheat on Eron Gjoni. Literally all of this appears to be resting on lies. There seems to have never even been the faintest of real justifications for targeting Zoe Quinn in the first place. That would, frankly, be consistent with the amount of lies we've already seen. And even more consistent with what we're going to see. You can't know for sure; there could be one scintilla of truth somewhere in the quagmire of misleading insinuations and sexual shaming. But in the course of finding it, you'll only discover another dozen lies. It's a balance of probabilities.

Here's another scrap of evidence for the scales: the reason Aurnheimer praised Gamergate was that it's "the single biggest siren bringing people into the folds of white nationalism." And Vox Day's a white nationalist too—that's what he means by Gamergate saving western civilization. Yes, yes. "Not all Gators." Still, let's take another face on that ridiculous "Mount Gamergate" cartoon, then: Milo Yiannopoulos. Yiannopoulos at the time wrote for Breitbart, the site from which Trump's openly white nationalist campaign manager Steve Bannon was hired from

Yiannopoulos offers a fascinating upgrade on the site's standard weaponized incoherence by couching it in his flamboyant homosexuality, deployed inevitably both to indiscriminately accuse critics of homophobia and serve as a shield by which to prove that Gamergate isn't all straight white men. He is an unrepentant and unreconstructed gay diva, a role that has always at best been differently misogynistic than the bro-culture he pitches his act at. Put simply, he performed his site-obligatory Trump-worship by calling The Donald "daddy."

By its nature Gamergate is long on opportunists, but few are as craven as Yiannopoulos. Prior to September of 2014, Yiannopoulos's attitude towards video gamers was that they were "pungent beta male bollock-scratchers," but once Gamergate took off he was quick to put his skills at writing vicious hit pieces to bad use. He is, if nothing else, a specialist—a Brit clearly raised on the classic reactionary tradition of the *Daily Mail*, whose sneeringly invasive style is best encapsulated by an article by Richard Littlejohn that literally drove a woman to suicide by penning a column in which he attacked her for undergoing gender reassignment surgery while working as a schoolteacher. (The *Daily Mail* was also famously sympathetic to Hitler; Yiannopoulos's own sympathies in this regard merely extend to denying that white supremacism has any influence in politics while writing extensive whitewashes of the alt-right's racism. Oh, and making Hitler salutes at Richard Spencer while doing a karaoke of "America the Beautiful.")

His first piece on Gamergate was published on September 1st, and demonstrates the perverse skill clearly—"It's easy to mock video gamers as dorky loners in yellowing underpants," he begins, heading off the obvious objection. "Indeed, in previous columns, I've done it myself. Occasionally at length. But, the more you learn about the latest scandal in the games industry, the more you start to sympathize with the frustrated male stereotype. Because an army of sociopathic feminist programmers and campaigners, abetted by achingly politically correct American tech bloggers, are terrorising the entire community—lying, bullying and manipulating their way around the internet for profit and attention." The sadistic details are worked even more finely than Vox Day's, the luridly sensationalist thrill of "an army of sociopathic feminist programmers and campaigners" followed by the assonant burst of "abetted by achingly," all leading into the tabloid grandeur of manipulative terrorist profiteers preying upon the helpless gamers, who, notably, he does not actually back down from mocking, opening his second paragraph with a declaration of the "fact of life that the video games industry is awash with marginalised, troubled people who have found it difficult to manage their lives in mainstream society."

It goes without saying that the grandiose claims are never actually justified. Yiannopoulos links the Internet Aristocrat video as "copious evidence in support" of the claims against Zoe Quinn, but by September 1st its major claims had long since been debunked, with all the accusations of sex for favors proven to be chronological impossibilities. But what's surprising is that Yiannopoulos barely bothers to pretend otherwise. At one point he mentions "a theory floating around that [Quinn] is planning to have herself beaten up at

an upcoming conference. It's an unconfirmed internet rumour, but it illustrates Quinn's credibility to gamers." It's breathtaking—an admission that this is a completely spurious accusation being wielded as evidence of the accusation's merit.

He goes on to criticize Quinn for complaining about death threats, opening with his "niggling suspicion that 'death threats' sent to female agitators aren't all they're cracked up to be," which is to say that they're distinct from physical violence. It's hard to disagree, but then, you'd expect that from the word "threats," which is after all a concept basically defined by the fact that it is talk as opposed to actual physical violence. But because they fall short of actual violence, Yiannopoulos dismisses them out of hand, proclaiming that to complain at all about receiving them is to "play the victim" and that it's "pathetic" to use such threats "to get sympathy." He treats going to the police about such threats, which is to say attempting to seek legally enshrined protection under harassment laws, with utter contempt, calling such behavior "monstrous." And then he suggests that the only reason anyone would care is "because they get themselves laid if they toe the party line." It does not even pretend to hold together—it is callousness wearing the trappings of reason like a skinsuit, dancing grotesquely within the fallen beast's corpse.

The piece was a traffic bonanza for *Breitbart*, and Yiannopoulos doubled down on the topic. Ten days later he, in rapid succession, accused Zoe Quinn of embezzling funds raised via *Depression Quest* and Anita Sarkeesian (whose 2012 Kickstarter was the subject of a massive campaign of sexual harassment that was blatantly just the same tendency towards misogynistic abuse in online gaming before it got monetized by the right-wing press, and who had the misfortune of releasing a new installment of her video series a few days after Gjoni's blog post was released) of falsifying a police report, taking to the website *4chan* afterwards to boast. Both claims fell through within the day, revealed as the product of sloppy investigations, running and hitting "publish" on information that should have been followed up on more thoroughly or indeed at all.

This marks the second appearance of *4chan* within our still egregiously narrow survey of Gamergate, the previous having been a passing mention by Vox Day, who described it as "a popular site with a sizable gaming contingency that had previously been ground zero for anything-goes channer culture." It is, to say the least, not a hard topic to arrive at when talking about Gamergate. But Yiannopoulos's relationship with chan culture runs particularly deep. For instance, just over a year after Gamergate started, Yiannopoulos posted an exposé on a minor left-wing activist who had been a

dogged critic of the movement. The nominal news story was that she had, a decade previously, made some tasteless jokes in an IRC channel, including some about being sexually attracted to an eight-year-old cousin of hers. On this breathtakingly thin basis Yiannopoulos proceeds to dig through her past, contacting her family, digging up old tax information, and illustrating the whole thing with an unflattering photograph of her pre-transition.

Spend a moment taking in the perversity and cruelty of this, because it's actually going to get more horrifying. A nominally serious news publication whose executive chairman got poached to run the Trump campaign publishes a privacy-invading hit piece on someone whose claim to fame does not extend beyond the fact that she'd recently been quoted in the *Washington Post*, when the extent of the evidence it has is that she'd talked some shit on the Internet a decade ago. The story was thin enough that days elapsed between Yiannopoulos first gloating about its existence on Twitter and it actually seeing print, during which time *Breitbart*'s lawyers worked valiantly to find a way to make it not libelous. It is as though the phrase "a latter-day Richard Littlejohn" was simply sitting in the English language, waiting for Milo Yiannopoulos to come along so it could describe something; the exact approach that led to Lucy Meadows's suicide casually applied to Twitter arguments.

But we haven't even gotten to the question of how Yiannopoulos came into the possession of the ten-year old IRC logs of a Gamergate critic. The answer is that he read them on an *8chan* thread, where they were posted by people who hacked her old server to obtain them. *8chan*, as the name suggests, is a spin-off of *4chan* founded by some people who were dissatisfied with its moderation policies. Its main claim to infamy is that it has a board devoted to pedophilia on which sexualized images of minors are routinely shared. Yes, you read that correctly—the story that a minor Twitter activist had once said some dumb shit about pedophilia was sourced from an imageboard with a sizeable pedophilia section.

This doesn't even scratch the surface of Yiannopoulos's affinity for chan culture, though. Despite the gobsmacking ethical issues with his *8chan*-sourced hit piece, Yiannopoulos only increased his reliance on the sites in the months since, to the point where the stories published under Yiannopoulos's byline were actually constructed by a team interns, many of them unpaid, and a lot of them recruited from, you guessed it, *4chan*. (These interns were unsurprisingly a deeply unsavory lot, including one who stabbed his father to death for calling him a Nazi. He was, to be clear, a Nazi.)

It's actually a weirdly perfect image. *4chan*, after all, was the birthplace of the hacktivist movement Anonymous, whose name came from the fact that

users could post without an account, their posts appearing as "Anonymous." The entire point and indeed joke of Anonymous is that it is not actually a group of hackers, but merely a name under which hacktivism may be performed. Anonymous, for its part, tends to be leftist, getting involved in Occupy Wall Street and activism on behalf of rape victims, but its aesthetic of active facelessness is, fittingly, shared widely. And so the discovery that *4chan* effectively has a sockpuppet who's a flamboyantly gay right-wing troll journalist feels in hindsight almost inevitable.

What's important to realize, though, is that the use of facelessness is one of Gamergate's default tactics, a fact that was hilariously exposed by Zoe Quinn herself five days after Yiannopoulos entered the fray when she revealed that she'd been lurking in some Gamergate IRC channels and released a bevy of screenshots. Not only do these screenshots show things like Eron Gjoni actively coordinating with Gamergate activists who were boasting openly about trying to hack Quinn's e-mail and dox her (both things Gamergate was elsewhere claiming Quinn had done to herself or faked), they give a tremendous level of insight into the basic operations of Gamergate, with messages like "I think all the sleeper cells are hard at work, there was a bit of organizing last night."

Perhaps the most revealing moment, however, is when the #NotYourShield hashtag comes up. This hashtag, proposed on *4chan* as a "culture jamming op," consisted of Twitter accounts purporting to belong to women and racial minorities expressing support for Gamergate and expressing outrage at being used as a "shield" by SJWs. But the truth of this is alluded to when a user called DepressionFries notes that "I already joined [the hashtag]. As a Latino. :3," the smiley at the end suggesting strongly that DepressionFries is not, in fact, Latinx. Indeed, further investigation of the accounts used by #NotYourShield revealed that many of them were sockpuppets that had previously been deployed in a pre-Gamergate *4chan* op called "Operation: Lollipop" that sought to "infiltrate feminists [sic] movements with twitter accounts," and then used them to do things like push a fake hashtag #EndFathersDay in order to make feminists look ridiculous. (Other similar hoaxes have included "freebleeding," which tried to invent a trend of women refusing to use menstrual products, and the self-explanatory #WhitesCantBeRaped.)

The fuller chatlogs (perversely released by Gamergate out of the deeply misguided belief that this would somehow make them look better) deepen the picture. At one point there's an extended discussion of how to generate a large number of accounts with credible reputations among SJW circles for "long-

term psyops," with suggestions like using bot-created SJW content or stealing accounts for their own purposes. At another point someone asks, "What kinds of false flags can we spread posing as SJWs?" But perhaps most intriguingly suggestive is the constant paranoia of false flag attacks being launched against them in turn. It's simply assumed by default that Quinn and Sarkeesian must be running multiple sockpuppets, and that any evidence of harassment they produce is just SJWs false flagging. Indeed, dismissing anything embarrassing for Gamergate as really being the work of nefarious SJWs is essentially reflexive—as one user says in response to the news that the iCloud hack that made nude photographs of celebrities such as Jennifer Lawrence public was being blamed on *4chan* due to a post there taking credit for it and asking for Bitcoin donations, "We just say it's a false flag. Boom." (That one was, in point of fact, actually *Reddit*.)

The instinctiveness of this defense is revealing, in the way that people's paranoias often are. How you assume people will organize against you is naturally indicative of one's own tactical instincts. And so within a culture where identity is an aggressively unfixed property it's hardly surprising that default tactics and worldview are that everyone is constantly misrepresenting who they are and what they want. Or, as one person in the chat logs puts it, that "this whole mess is triple, quadruple, n-degree false flags. All the way down. From the very start. This is PR warfare in a post-social media landscape."

The problem, of course, is that there are actual people involved who do have identities. One of the most heart-breaking things to come out of Gamergate is a video from a guy using the handle GameDiviner that was livestreamed during what can only be described as a mild breakdown. This was a year into the movement, when it had little to do but turn on itself, and GameDiviner found himself on the receiving end of a torrent of abuse when he took a more moderate stance suggesting that the movement admit that there had been harassment on its side and seek to be less insular. The thing that most unsettled him, however, was the way in which he couldn't tell whether people he'd considered his friends were attacking him under other names, or whether the identities he'd befriended them under were even real. At one point, audibly choking up, he talks about how the only thing keeping him together right now is that his son is playing under the desk while he records, and he can reach out and touch something that he knows is real. It's at once tremendously moving and distressing, and, of course, he was widely mocked for it, with the *Ralph Retort* taking particular glee in writing him off as a "two-bit nut" whose "epic meltdown" was flatly hilarious.

GameDiviner's disastrous attempt at a moderate position was briefly supported by another of Vox Day's civilization-savers, Sargon of Akkad, one of Gamergate's many quasi-famous YouTube stars. Sargon was quick to toss GameDiviner under the bus once his video was posted, but ultimately stuck with his position that the Gamergate brand was becoming toxic, announcing a month later that he was "done" with Gamergate. This was in no sense a claim that he was done with the basic set of issues or with his growing audience; for instance, he continued his "Why Do People Hate Feminism" video-blog series, which is currently up to twelve parts clocking in at a bit over four hours.

He is not always so prolix—one of his videos is entitled "Anita Sarkeesian Debunked in Under a Minute," and is at the very least half-true. It offers a pair of incompetently spliced clips of Sarkeesian talking about her passion for games for some promotional videos, then running a jumbled set of excerpts from her introducing a fanvid and talking about how she had to learn a lot about video games to make it. This takes up thirty-eight seconds of the forty-nine second video before Sargon chimes in over an image of the first paragraph of the Wikipedia article for "Confidence trick" and declares these positions mutually exclusive, asking which one sounds like a genuine moment as opposed to a scripted one. This question is in practice simply a discussion of their two contexts, i.e. scripted videos versus an off-the-cuff presentation. As for the supposed contradiction, if you guessed that the quotes were actually from years apart, you win: the second set of clips is from two years earlier than the first, and is actually her talking just about AAA games in the context of a snarky video of clips of male video game protagonists edited together to Flight of the Concords' "Too Many Dicks."

Such dishonesty—and note in particular the way in which the accusation that she's a con artist actively trying to defraud people is suggested through implication by overlaying an image over audio that's actually saying something completely different—remains consistent regardless of length. Take the first part of "Why Do People Hate Feminism." It is, from its basic framing, ruthlessly misleading, structuring itself as an ironic address *to* feminists answering their apparent question of why people hate them. This question is poised in the form of a clip of Emma Watson speaking at the UN about how feminism "has too often become synonymous with manhating," followed by a cut to further in the speech where she asks, "Why is the word such an uncomfortable one?" after which he cuts in to say, "You know, feminists, I feel inclined to help you." Never mind, though, that the question was a rhetorical one that Watson went on to answer herself, which means that Sargon of Akkad is literally talking over Hermione Granger for four hours to mansplain

why feminists are hated—what's staggering is the low quality of the answer given.

Its first example is a clip from a Pantene ad, which Sargon runs for a full thirty-three seconds, of women apologizing in various hastily sketched situations—to get a word in edgewise, upon being jostled, as a greeting when entering an office. He then goes back through it over the course of literally more than a minute and fifteen seconds, looking at every scenario and declaring that the woman was in fact correct to apologize, sometimes with an explanation, though often an inaccurate one such as a false claim that the pictured woman was "sitting with her elbow on the next chair." At which point he plays the second half of the commercial (another twenty-five seconds) in which the women respond to the situations more assertively, then says in the most exasperated tone he can muster that this amounts to the women being "passive aggressive bitches" and points out that the women are only doing this to men. Mercifully, he does not then run through all of the examples to detail how the woman is now behaving rudely, but this gruesomely facile account of how a random ad for hair products demonstrates feminism's ideological commitment to misandry manages to stretch across four minutes of a fifteen minute video. (And if you were wondering whether Sargon expresses even the barest wisp of contemplation over whether or not an ad whose message is "Hair products will make you confident" can be called feminist… you weren't actually wondering that, were you?)

The remaining examples are a Verizon ad, the *SCUM Manifesto*, the existence of the #killallmen hashtag, and a 1998 Hillary Clinton speech. So by the end we've at least made it into territory that vaguely looks like it might be connected to what Emma Watson was talking about in front of the UN, but equally, the best evidence he can find is one paragraph of a minor and nearly twenty-year-old speech, and even then the extent of man-hating he can find is the claim that "women have always been the primary victims of war." As an explanation/illustration of why people hate feminists, it's a ridiculously scant case told over excruciating length.

There's an obvious and necessary comparison to make at this point, which is to Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* series. This is, after all, fairly self-evidently what Sargon of Akkad is imitating, at least on a structural level—the use of an uncontextualized video clip as an opener, the brief monologue introducing the specific trope being illustrated, and the sequence of clips and commentaries to provide examples. In fact, recognizing this model helps explain some of Sargon's stranger rhetorical decisions such as the otherwise inexplicable decision to open with a random ad for Pantene in order

to illustrate feminism, which makes marginally more sense when you realize Sargon's mimicking a video series about pop culture analysis.

But for all their structural similarities, the contrast is sharp. And I don't simply mean this in terms of who's right and who's wrong (though this is obvious). Nor do I mean simply in terms of basic production values. Sarkeesian's wildly successful Kickstarter gave her a per-video production budget orders of magnitude larger than Sargon's that allows her to have all sorts of whiz-bang graphics and crisp editing, whereas he has audible pops in his sound editing when he sutures two of his monologue takes together (and he's one of the better Gamergate video makers). But what's really striking is his basic structure and timing. Recall that Sargon took 3:49 seconds to get through his introduction and first example. In contrast, at the 3:49 mark of Anita Sarkeesian's "Women as Background Decoration: Part Two," the video she had the misfortune of releasing exactly a week after the Internet Aristocrat's video), Sarkeesian has already recapped the previous video's argument, gone through five examples of her trope in video games, and offered a quick-fire set of examples of the trope outside of video games for context. That's as many examples as Sargon makes it through in his entire fifteen minute video, and Sarkeesian keeps the pace going for 28:32, ending with a positive case study illustrating how video games can handle trauma more maturely than the cavalier uses of sexual violence she's been talking about for the last half hour.

It's not, to be clear, that Sarkeesian is being sloppy with her examples, nor that she's moving through material at an unusually fast clip. It's that Sargon's videos are torturously slow, resembling nothing so much as those lengthy "One Weird Trick" videos, repeating the same not-quite-claims over and over again in a paranoid recitation of the big bombshell revelation that'll be coming if you just watch to the end of this next video. In those videos the point is explicitly to fish for rubes, identifying people who will sit through a tedious and badly made video on the assumption that they'll be easy marks.

And while Gamergate usually doesn't have a product to sell in quite the same literal way, it's worth noting how, for instance, two doors down from them is someone like Stefan Molyneux, whose output amounts to 30-60 minute PowerPoint presentations consisting of a by-now familiar sort of low-content dissembling, and whose business endgame is literally a cult. We might also think back to Andrew Auernheimer identifying Gamergate as a tool for white nationalist recruitment.

But the difference between Gamergate and a free samples scam or a cult is as significant as the comparison. There are plenty of pro-Gamergaters pulling

healthy profits making this crap, Sargon among them, but for the most part it's not really all that profit-focused, nor that celebrity-focused. It's cultish and scammy, but the "-ish" and "-my" matter there. Yes, Gamergate stokes its members to spend hours upon hours every day tending their garden of Twitter sockpuppets and spreading dank memes about raping Anita Sarkeesian, but what's surprising is the extent to which they manage to sell ideological gratification as its own reward. (I mean, the Russians have to actually pay people.)

Vox Day's "Gamergate will save western civilization" claim is the most grandiose version of this, but it's striking more in its apparent indifference to how ridiculous it sounds than in its extremity. This has been a feature since the beginning, with the bewildering inflation of Zoe Quinn's alleged infidelity into a vast web of corruption in video games journalism. And it's utterly central to the entire enterprise. The Gamergate narrative has always required a vast quasi-conspiracy to function, some story whereby feminists or SJWs or cultural Marxists exercise near-complete control over video games and video game journalism.

Perhaps this is no surprise. At the end of the day anything that's trying to claim so much of people's lives is going to need some pretty massive ideological stakes. (That or make it fun, which is the approach taken by video games, and would also serve to explain Gamergate, though it's frankly just as nightmarish.) But perhaps more importantly, this sort of sweeping claim is simply what's necessary to portray a world upside-down enough that Anita Sarkeesian making YouTube videos about sexism in video games is a vast existential threat in a way that the pervasive sexism she demonstrates isn't. In other words, here too we come back to that sclerotic dependence on blatant falsehood.

By this point, however, the mad scale of the thing impresses more than the lies themselves. Recall the frothing paranoia over false flag operations. This isn't your garden variety MRA conspiracy theory, which tends to be characterized by a myopic focus on, for instance, equating the ability of women to deny heterosexual men sex with political and economic power. Rather, it's a world in which the basic ideas of "culture" and "society" are assumed to be shams, constructed to deceive and propagated by unknown agents to advance arcane agendas within some elaborate game of 4-D chess.

And it's in this context that we can finally understand how something as self-evidently harmless as *Depression Quest* can somehow be viewed as an existential threat. It is, after all, a manifestly unthreatening game. Even the poison pen of Vox Day visibly struggles to find much of an angle on it,

ultimately having to settle for the fact that it's not trying to technologically compete with AAA releases that have multimillion dollar budgets and that it's not fun, which, let's face it, would be a pretty weird thing for a game about depression to aim for. Even if one is pathologically opposed to lo-fi art games that are actively disinterested in providing a nice cozy Skinner box for their audience, portraying them as a large-scale threat to western civilization is downright bizarre. We're not even talking about things like *Battlecruiser 3000 AD*, *Daikatana*, or *Duke Nukem Forever* that squandered vast amounts of investment and engaged in a relentless hype cycle before delivering a substandard product that wasn't worth people's money. We're talking about a free web game with a tip jar that takes a couple of minutes to play, and that got passing mention on a couple of gaming sites that were talking about the artistic fringes of the medium.

But looked at from within the context of Gamergate's specific paranoias, the stakes become altogether clearer. Fundamentally, *Depression Quest* is a game about validating identities and making human connections. Its goal is to communicate the lived experience of Zoe Quinn's depression to players and to facilitate empathy and understanding. It is an exaggeration to even call this identity politics. Sure, it has potential implications for the treatment and stigmatization of mental health, but these aren't foregrounded in the game. It's simply a game that says, "this is what it's like to be me." But to a worldview that depends on the assumption that individual identities are fundamentally disingenuous and exist only as props to craft larger cultural narratives, the act of saying "I exist; this experience is real" is a genuine threat.

The contrasting worldviews are perhaps best expressed by Gamergate's mascot of choice, Vivian James. The character stemmed out of a PR stunt whereby Gamergate supporters ostentatiously donated money to a group called The Fine Young Capitalists, which was nominally a "radical feminist" game design studio, but in practice a front organization created to aid crowdfunding for an obscure Colombian game studio called Autobótika. The cynicism of this was matched by Gamergate, which reckoned that such a donation would, as one *4chan* user put it, make them "PR-untouchable," while in reality The Fine Young Capitalists were chosen because their "spokesman" (in reality the executive producer at Autobótika) had been one of the first people to actively try to court Gamergate for financial gain by reigniting a previously settled feud with Zoe Quinn, who had previously criticized The Fine Young Capitalists for exploitative labor practices and transphobia. But the donation meant that *4chan* got to design a character for the game in question.

Continuing in the general vein of "crass PR that would probably be more effective if it weren't plotted by idiots on a public message board," *4chan* rejected suggestions such as "a guy who hates women but likes tits" and "dick butt" in favor of a suggestion to make the character "an average female gamer to troll everyone," specifically "the tards in the media" who would expect *4chan* to offer something blatantly offensive and vaguely pedophilic. Being *4chan*, this resulted in a moe anthropomorphization named Vivian James (homophonic to video games) wearing a *4chan* clover in her hair and dressed in green and purple (a reference to an old *4chan* meme about rape; come on, you weren't actually expecting any better, were you?). Also being *4chan*, there was immediately porn of her. Which was part of the package of images sent to The Fine Young Capitalists.

A typically rousing PR success, in other words, but James quickly became a mascot for Gamergate—she appears in the header of the main Gamergate subreddit /r/KotakuInAction, for instance, and is the source of their green and purple color scheme. But what's astonishing is not the degree to which Gamergate can fuck up even the most seemingly simple of tasks. Baffling idiocy can hardly surprise us at this point. The bit that still stands out as weird, even after looking at this for as long as we have been, is the attempt to conceptualize this piece of idiot propaganda as a human being. The post announcing her design says the following:

> Plenty of excited discussion around personality was had, but that's something I think you should be free to work around. The only thing we'd like you to keep in mind (should relevant situations ever come up) are the things that are obvious from her designs and our board's attitude towards the controversy:
>
> - Tough-loves video games
> - Loathes dishonesty and hipocrisy [sic]
> - Low-affect, grumpy, perpetually fed up and tired

This is, it's important to stress, the same announcement that sent pornography of the character to The Fine Young Capitalists, so the scope of the excited discussion is pretty clear. But what stands out are the bullet points at the end—that this "average female gamer" is an adolescent girl with no defined character traits other than her love of video games and her agreement with her creators (whose dishonesty is obviously tolerated), and who is in fact specifically depicted as a sort of passively irritated zombie that may be freely projected upon past that.

It's a grotesque inversion of identity—not so much a description of lived experience as some sort of unperson undoing unthings. She does not even play video games—the nature of her blankness means that she is the rare gamer who doesn't have favorite games. There's not even so much as a

preference between consoles and PCs. They've literally managed to create a fake geek girl. She loves video games without desiring anything of them, which is to say utterly unlike the way in which any piece of art has ever been loved by anyone.

And Gamergate as a whole is scarcely better. It's always been notable for its near-complete lack of actual discussion of videogames. When it does tackle them, the content of the discussion is bewilderingly scant. (Milo Yiannopoulos's attempts at "gamer" metaphors are infamously cringeworthy.) Even their supposedly most passionate topic, ethics in video game journalism, is unfathomably selective, as illustrated by their reaction when the news broke that *Kotaku*, a major games publication, was being blacklisted by companies in retaliation for bad reviews. This sort of bullying for favorable coverage, in an industry where bonuses are routinely calculated based on aggregate review scores, is blatant corruption of exactly the sort that Zoe Quinn not having an affair with a games journalist whose scant coverage of her free game couldn't have been influenced by it anyway is not. And it's certainly more corrupt, in that it actually involves trading free copies of the game for favorable coverage unlike the things Gamergate objected to, such as writing a review of something you backed on Kickstarter, i.e. actually paid for yourself. And yet in the face of this corruption—a problem that's been observed about video game journalism since 2007 when Jeff Gertsmann was sacked by *GameSpot* for not giving *Kane & Lynch* a high enough score—crickets. Indeed, given that *Kotaku* is one of the sites Gamergate most widely views as pro-SJW (recall the name of their subreddit), the high-profile demonstration of massive corruption in video games journalism was for the most part celebrated.

Like Vivian James, it is the negation of any sort of desire. It is a vision of video gaming reduced to passively accepting the products of big-name developers on the terms that are offered, without any sort of opinion or personal identity involved. That this reduces video gaming—a medium that has, since the heyday of the NES, in point of fact included countless women and minorities in its tens of millions of players, and currently shows a clear majority of women among console gamers—to a monoculture is irrelevant. They don't care about the history of the medium, to the point that they targeted an academic focusing on video game archiving for harassment because he publicly stated that anxiety about Gamergate was making it harder to get funding, whose work they then declared was unimportant anyway. Not even a monoculture then—an anticulture, with Vivian James ironically its perfect representation. It's a desire to befit their worldview, its adamance

dwarfed only by its fundamental emptiness. There's nothing there. There's never been anything there.

Except, of course, the trail of devastation left behind. The utter sludge of human misery brought down upon victim after victim over the course of this ghastly farce. Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, Sarah Nyberg, Randi Harper, Phil Fish, Alison Rapp, Veerender Jubbal, and so many more, an immeasurably vast ledger of people subjected to its brutality, every one of their stories with more weight and substance and meaning than the entirety of the movement that rained down this unceasing torrent of harassment and hatred. And all they've done—all any of them have done—is to be people. Ordinary people, with all the flaws and strangeness that implies.

But as Vox Day bluntly puts it, "we don't care." And it's impossible to argue with. They clearly don't. By any reasonable interpretation, that most basic of human cognitive functions is literally the single biggest thing they are opposed to. They are insatiable because there is nothing they want. Nothing save for nothing, as far as the eye can see. And so their blind eye twitches helplessly around, staring endlessly at the random shapes and colors that dance upon its cataracted lens and believing that they can see it all. Howling apophenically into the void to try to get everyone else to see it too—the vast conspiracy that's all around them. Finding victim after victim to abuse in the name of this gruesome folly. Measuring their circle. Starting anywhere.

Theses on a President

"Through the ruin of a city stalked the ruin of a man."—Terrance Dicks, 1977

0.

Let us accept that categorization is pointless, and that any attempt at it will eventually collapse under the basic fact that he is contradictory and in his own way even contains multitudes. He is what he is, in his own way as deific as that makes him sound. He does not have immediate political analogues in 1930s Germany or 40s BCE Rome any more than he does in 1650s Britain or 1970s Uganda. Similarities abound, but every case is unique. That's what Great Man Theory means.

It is not even useful to call him liberal or conservative. He is right-wing, but only in the sense that he poses an existential threat to the left. On the whole, however, he is not particularly ideological. He is an aesthetic wedded to a perversion. In the end, most people are, and virtually all politicians. Still, one has to start somewhere.

1.

It is not quite possible for anyone who did not grow up in the greater New York area to understand him. It is not that rich idiots are unique to the Atlantic northeast; the British class system is founded on them, after all. Rather, it is the particular subspecies of rich idiot that he occupies, one that is, so far as I can tell, unique to the white-assimilated second and third generation immigrant populations of New York. Post-Gatsby empire-builders, insistent, often not entirely without reason, that an ethos of grit and ambition has driven their success, but where that success is always the expansion of the family business as opposed to starting it. And there's always a family business, generally one rooted in the idiosyncratic infrastructure concerns of the region. Their chief talent is braggadocio. They profess love for Frank Sinatra. Their favorite movie is *The Godfather*, but they don't have the patience for Part II.

It would be cruel to recount immediate analogues from my own upbringing, but they abound. Instead I'll pick another vivid memory of the region: the day after the Sandy Hook shooting, in a local breakfast-and-lunch diner called King's that people actually from Newtown still call Leo's, poking at pancakes that are blatantly a dessert with an overwhelming sense of the world that isn't grief or sorrow so much as horror and awe. And from the next table over, this terrible, gregarious white man. He's so upset about it, he doesn't even want to have Christmas. He says this over and over again. It is not just the only opinion he has on the matter, it is the only opinion anyone around him is to have on the matter. His dining companion. The waitress. Anyone who acknowledges his existence (and he makes it difficult not to) will be told this precise interpretation of the murder of twenty-seven people as the definitive take. As he leaves, he gives the waitress his card and tells her if she knows anyone who wants to buy a car, she should send them his way.

That's what he is.

2.

The most perverse thing about him is that he does not actually value money so much as being rich. As he puts it, money is just a way of keeping score. This is not to say that he does not enjoy the material trappings of luxury, but he enjoys them primarily because they provide constant affirmation of the fact that he is a rich and powerful man. As far as the details, he knows what he likes, and has probably asserted the fact in those exact words. But the way in which this is true is almost base tautology. He recognizes the tingling of his lizard hindbrain when certain things happen to him, and he calls these things great.

These things include but are not limited to: seeing his name in big, gold letters; a steak, cooked medium, with an overpriced California cult wine; telling someone to do something demeaning and having them do it, particularly when black men carry things for him; Dorian columns; when people break eye contact with him; seeing himself on television; groping women; the look in a man's eye when he knows you're screwing him over but goes along with it anyway; and *Citizen Kane*.

3.

That last one is a concrete example (unlike the steaks, which he actually prefers well-done, and would probably prefer Chris Christie getting him McDonald's to either option). He recorded a three-minute video for an aborted Errol Morris project in which he provides a brief analysis of the film.

It is, of course, terrible; he's an idiot after all. A highlight is where he discusses the totemic power of Charles Foster Kane's last words: "The word 'rosebud' for whatever reason has captivated moviegoers and movie watchers for so many years, and to this day is perhaps the single word, and perhaps if they came up with another word that meant the same thing it wouldn't have worked. But 'rosebud' works."

And yet his enjoyment of the film is tangibly authentic. He gets genuinely enthused speaking about things as basic as the ever-lengthening table being a symbol of Kane's growing isolation. He speaks with all the smug vulnerability you'd expect about how wealth "isolates you from other people" because "you have your guard up, much more so than you would if you didn't have wealth." It's clear this is actually a movie he cares about, that he's actually thought about. He visibly thinks about it in front of you, pausing, taking oddly heartfelt care choosing his words. It's not hard to see why *Citizen Kane* would be able to cast such a spell over him—just imagine the swell of emotion and pride he must have felt when he found out that the greatest movie ever made was about people like him. But his love for it is atypical for him: he is not angry at it, it does not benefit him, it does not call him by his name, and yet he loves it without further demand. It's the Grinch with his heart growing two sizes. Maybe he has the patience for *The Godfather Part II* after all.

4.

And then the camera rolls on, the illusion crashing. "Rosebud works," someone shouts from off camera, and he chuckles. "Right," he mumbles. "For whatever reason," he repeats, instinctively reasserting dominance, reframing the pitch as his again, however diminished it might now be. A jump cut, and the same voice asks, "If you could give Charles Foster Kane advice, what would you say to him?" He doesn't miss a beat: "Get yourself a different woman."

Powerful words from a man on his third wife. Two were Eastern European models, one a television personality. All are blondes, an almost painfully inevitable detail. He does not even pretend they're more than trophy wives. He's nearly a quarter-century older than Melania; he'd already started work at his father's company when she was born. He literally has no idea why you think that's creepy. Of course he doesn't: he said he hoped his one-year-old daughter Tiffany inherited Marla's breasts, expressed a desire to date Ivanka, and raped Ivana.

What's perhaps most interesting here is the idea that the procurement of an adequate trophy wife is presented as business advice. On one level there's an

almost medieval sense of marriage as a political act, a transaction undertaken. This fits with *Citizen Kane*, of course, but speaks to Welles's flare for the Shakespearean more than anything. Certainly it doesn't describe his status symbol demonstrations of virility in which women are just another way to keep score. No, what it fits is the brand. He likes his women like he likes his buildings: big and decorated in gold.

5.

That's gender; what of the other obvious flashpoint, race? Where his sexism is object-oriented, his racism is fundamentally more structural. His positions relative to Muslims, Blacks, and Hispanics appear little more than the huckster continuing to say what the people respond to. That is not to say there's no substance to them, but they are a byproduct of the larger process of deal-making. More interesting is where his basic inclination towards racial stereotyping originates from: the material realities of New York real estate, its patterns of historical ethnic migrations geologically stratified across the city's expansion. The practical result: his career is a decades-long chain of talking about "the Italians," "the Chinese" and, especially in the Manhattan real estate market in which he established himself, "the Jews," a fact that explains one of the more idiosyncratic features of his specific racism.

His is, in other words, a psychogeographic racism, psychogeography being a term invented by the French Marxist Guy Debord, who describes its goal as being "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective psychogeographical can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery." One does not imagine he would like this. No matter; it is essential to understanding the Manhattan real estate market upon which he created himself. His arrival on the public scene came in a redlining lawsuit accusing him of offering prospective black tenants higher rents than whites, a proper bit of trench warfare in the reshaping of New York's emotions and behavior.

6.

Real understanding requires we go to the source, however: Jamaica Estates, Queens. Forming the western portion of Long Island along with the formerly independent city of Brooklyn, with which it became part of the larger New York City at the close of the 19th century, Queens as a whole is massively

diverse—by some reckonings the most ethnically diverse place in the world. Jamaica Estates, on the other hand, at least when he was growing up there in the 1950s, was not. (These days it's majority minority.) A gated community designed by the Jamaica Estates Corporation and built in part by his father shortly after Queens became part of the city, Jamaica Estates was an attempt to construct a community that felt like the European countryside, but was nestled in the city. The land was left hilly and trees were preserved, so the street structure wound across the 500 acres, with the lot sizes left large and topped with Tudor revivalism. His memories of the place are revealing: "Different parts of Queens were rough; this was an oasis."

You can see where the idea of the Wall comes from, at least. But even more important are his memories of traversing the Wall by taking the F-train down into the city, calling it a "microcosm" that showed him what New York "was all about." It's irresistible—the aristocrat riding down the hill to gaze upon the commoners and to be seen in return as the self-proclaimed central image of his entire worldview. He has said, when asked when, exactly, America was great, that it was in the 1940s and 50s, which is to say during his own childhood. This dynamic is precisely what he means.

7.

Let's back up and look at Tudor revivalism. A camp architectural style, Olde English quaintness in the form of thin boards bolted onto the exteriors of houses to give the false impression of timber framing. There's an intergenerational narrative of immigration in this. For his father it was a recreation of European aesthetics in an American context—a recapitulation of old world aristocracy constructed as an enclave of the new world, America viewed as something unclaimed, and thus with room for social mobility. A second-generation immigrant who has succeeded at assimilation fashioning himself a quaint, cartoon version of old world elegance.

He, on the other hand, is third-generation, Germany nothing more than a story, and one largely suppressed after both father and grandfather had played down their heritages during a World War. To him the old world was Manhattan, the new the outer boroughs. Social mobility meant advancing within the aristocracy—proving himself the equal of the old-moneyed Manhattanites. Born assimilated, the ostentatious trappings of wealth that surrounded him were understood purely in terms of their excess, their pastiche having been rendered unintelligible without the accompanying sense of heritage.

8.

As a geographic trajectory, this was as fortuitous as it was inevitable. New York City was on the slow slide from being told to drop dead by Gerald Ford to a summer of blackouts and arson, and Manhattan was an object of faded glory. His target befitted this—the Commodore Hotel, a crumbling relic of the gilded age across from Grand Central Station, once called the Most Beautiful Lobby in the World, where John McEntree Bowman had once hosted a circus, elephants and all, on nothing more than a whim upon hearing the offhand comment of a guest, now a bankrupted rat trap in a seedy outcrop of Times Square's porn district, its occupancy hovering at 50%, with a brothel taking up retail space on the second floor. The strategy was characteristic: a gut renovation would rip out everything but a single foyer, while the brick exterior would get a glass facade, the illusion of the contemporary bolted onto the classically modern.

Central to the project, however, was the wealth of familial connections, mostly cultivated through his father. Perhaps most important was New York Mayor Abe Beame, the sort of man who clapped his arms around him and his father at a meeting and proclaimed, "Whatever my friends want in this town, they get." In this case what they wanted was a bill to pass through the state legislature that would provide for a twenty-year tax abatement for projects such as the hotel, which would become a Grand Hyatt. The bill faltered, however, and so he turned to the time-honored tactic of the rich and fell upwards, hatching a scheme to use the state's Urban Development Corporation to buy the property for a dollar and then lease it back tax-free for forty years.

It was here that his father's connections became truly crucial, as otherwise he'd have completely fucked the deal when he waltzed into UDC head Richard Ravitch's office for a meeting and, when Ravitch offered a lesser deal than he wanted, threatened to have him fired. But pressure from Beame and City Hall eventually turned Ravitch around. With typical regard for the truth, he went on to claim that he'd gotten the forty-year abatement "because I didn't ask for fifty." But the dependence on his father's connections didn't stop there—it was Fred who guaranteed the $70 million construction loan, and who secured an additional $65 million from Chase when the project went over budget.

9.

Of the numerous cronies surrounding the Grand Hyatt deal, however, one stands out. The point of the UDC, when it was created in the 1960s, was to develop racially integrated housing. And so there is a particularly rich irony in

the fact that one of the key brokers of the deal was Roy Cohn, whose association with the family had begun when he represented them in a federal lawsuit that alleged they were offering different rental terms and falsely claiming to have no vacancies when blacks inquired about apartments in thirty-nine separate buildings across the city.

The significance of Cohn's mentorship is an understandably popular angle on our subject. His influence echoes on long after his death—Roger Stone and Paul Manafort were both friends of his. And beyond that, Cohn is a legendarily repulsive figure. He was in many ways the archetype of the unscrupulous pit bull attorney—a man never troubled by principles or shame who represented his clients with ruthless bluster and a stunning gift for hypocrisy. But more appealing is simply the bizarre scope of his career. He came to prominence in 1951 when he threatened David Greenglass into perjuring himself testifying against his sister Ethel Rosenberg. This launched him into becoming chief counsel to Joseph McCarthy on the recommendation of J. Edgar Hoover. There he became the primary architect of the Red Scare and helped convince Dwight Eisenhower to ban the federal employment of homosexuals before finally being forced out in disgrace after McCarthy was censured. He returned to New York and continued a law career there, representing at various times the Roman Catholic Church, the New York Yankees, John Gotti, and Studio 54. And then for good measure he posthumously became one of the main characters in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which portrayed his last days dying of AIDS and vigorously remaining in the closet, memorably played by Al Pacino in the HBO adaptation. He is perhaps the only character in the tale as singular as the man himself—a ragged scar against the post-War American half-century, and the closest thing to an external explanation that exists.

Cohn was, of course, kicked to the curb as soon as his diagnosis became clear.

10.

Having made his foothold in Manhattan, he set out upon his signature set piece, the Tower. It is a cliché to note that the skyscraper's architecture is largely about fucking the sky. In western culture, at least, this is fundamentally homoerotic, the sky being a traditionally patriarchal figure. As is usually the case with him, this bluntly Freudian approach pays clear-cut dividends, forming a shockingly robust explanation for his actions. What it misses, however, is the foaming excess of it. The Tower's serrated design does not merely serve to make it look bigger than it is; it makes it so that it appears to

fuck the sky with an animalistically barbed penis, its jagged teeth biting in so the firmament can't escape.

More broadly, the Tower applies the principles of Tudor revivalism to the skyscraper. The word du jour of 1980s architectural critics was "tacky," which is hardly inaccurate, especially once one gets a glimpse of the lobby, but also serves to miss the point, encoding a judgment of taste rooted in aesthetic values that are simply not meaningfully in play. It is more accurate to say that it makes a very pure commitment to the visual essence of the skyscraper while remaining weirdly indifferent to its context or function. The Tower, in other words, cares more about looking like a skyscraper than being one.

11.

This preposterous structure marks what is possibly the most important transition in his life. Up to its completion in 1983, it is basically possible to understand him as a human being in the traditional sense. His motivations in building it, its basic aesthetics, even most of the idiosyncrasies of its construction, all of these things make up a perfectly understandable pathology, a sort of Charles Foster Kane figure whose psyche can be summed up in a single, magical word. He might have had a name. But then he literally built a six-hundred-and-sixty-six foot tower to which he offered up that name, sacrificing it upon its black altar such that the building became a titanic sigil of the sixteenth Major Arcana of the Tarot of the Golden Dawn, symbolizing destruction and ruin, with only the remnants of the man whose name it ate living within the rotting heart of its penthouse.

Like the Hyatt before it, it was built in the ruins of modernism, this time the remains of fallen department store Bonwit Teller's 1930 flagship store, which had famously been dominated by art deco reliefs of sphinxes on the exterior walls, which he initially promised to donate to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Instead, perhaps upon realizing the cost, perhaps out of an always-intended switcheroo, he had them destroyed in the night, literally jackhammering the goddess into the ground to build his Tower upon her corpse. A Ruined Modernism.

12.

So you can't exactly call the eventual divorce a surprise. Still, this inevitable consequence hurts, if only because it's expressed in terms he understands—a demand for cash, predicated on his infidelity. It is not an attack on his name but on his image, a tabloid onslaught in which one of his bits on the side provided the famously libel-proof headline "Best Sex of My Life!" But there

were other losses at the same time: Cohn, of course, along with one of the last lawsuits he filed, an antitrust case against the NFL that ended in a nominal victory with deliberately insulting damages of $3, increased to $3.76 due to interest during appeals. This was also the period where he began his ill-fated expansion into Atlantic City, which would lead to his first round of bankruptcies.

But it is the Tower that anchors the transition, pegged by multiple associates as a turning point in his personality, where he became convinced of his own infallibility. At the heart of it, as Barbara Res, manager on the Tower, puts it, was the fact that "he became a celebrity… as he got more famous, he got nastier." A common narrative arc, to be sure, but generally lacking the ruthless efficiency of an architectural black mass to sacrifice your name upon the altar of your image.

13.

Certainly its construction anticipates the transfiguration it wrought. It was a conjuring trick from the zoning onward. The air rights of the adjacent Tiffany flagship (happy to lose the competition of the Bonwit Teller store) were used to get permission to build a tower in the lot, then an extra twenty floors were gained by declaring the lobby, an ostentatious five-level atrium dominated by pink Italian marble in a multi-story waterfall, a public space. In practice, of course, the lobby was simply a cathedral to his now-eaten name, today occupied by an eponymous Bar (enjoy a "You're Fired" of house-made Bloody Mary mix, Absolut vodka, and celery for $15), Grill (from whence the best taco bowls famously emerge), and Shop (hats, these days).

The actual business of erecting the thing, meanwhile, was simply bizarre. By this point a certain obstinate contrarianism had already set in—an instinct that would eventually become his primary means of populist appeal. And so, urged forward by Cohn, he opted to use reinforced concrete as the primary building material, consciously deciding to work with Mafia-controlled companies, presumably on some logic that he could just pay them off and have it end up cheaper than more traditional steel girders.

Augmenting the Mafia-owned union crews were a contingent of undocumented Polish immigrants, something he was apparently more fond of those days. And in the course of threatening someone after he stiffed them on their pay he hit upon one of his most famously bonkers signature moves: acting as his own representative over the phone by making up a dumb name, usually John Barron. In this case Barron was his lawyer, but he'd quickly settle into his more regular role of his "spokesman," a role in which he gave what is

possibly the most suggestive account of himself ever: "I'm somebody that he knows and I think somebody that he trusts and likes."

14.

It is the John Barron anecdote that best prefigures where things go next. He sold his name, yes, but what did he get out of the deal? The answer, simply put, is what he would hereafter treat as his most valuable asset: his brand. In short, he became a creature of pure image. The image in question is as crassly unsubtle as the Tower; the idea of being rich stripped of any and all content other than the thunder of its own self-existence. Or, more prosaically, he became the sort of person who would want something as gobsmackingly awful as the Tower's penthouse, which, as numerous journalists given a "private tour" of it have noted, shows literally no sign whatsoever of him living in it. It is the idea of a rich dude distilled to its lowest common denominator and launched as a celebrity.

The first visible sign of this was *The Art of the Deal*. His ghostwriter on the project, Tony Schwartz, has offered a suitably chilling account of the book's composition, describing how he could not get his subject to focus long enough to give a short interview about his childhood. He finally ended up researching the book by sitting in on phone calls, an approach that delighted his subject who, Schwartz recalled, "loved the attention—if he could have had three hundred thousand people listening in, he would have been even happier." Schwartz, for his part, was rather more dispirited by it, especially when it became clear while asking follow-up questions about the phone calls that his subject was lying freely about nearly every aspect of his business operations. "More than anyone else I have ever met, he has the ability to convince himself that what he is saying at any given moment is true, or sort of true, or at least ought to be true."

15.

It is presumably this ability that inspired Schwartz's opening to the book, where he has his subject proclaim, "I don't do it for the money. I've got enough, much more than I'll ever need. I do it to do it. Deals are my art form. Other people paint beautifully on canvas or write wonderful poetry. I like making deals, preferably big deals. That's how I get my kicks." He goes on to describe his lack of a typical day, and how he prefers "to come to work each day and just see what develops," which gives the sense of a sort of endlessly freewheeling nature—a thrill at the constant flux of negotiation. The irony is that this was in most regards the exact opposite of the truth: his status as a

public icon meant that his life had, in practice, attained a sort of stasis, his newfound existence as a creature of pure image running in a self-perpetuating loop whereby being famous for being a rich asshole could consistently earn him enough to keep being a rich asshole.

The awful nature of this state is perhaps best expressed by the oft-cited anecdote in which he informed Ivanka (or, in some tellings, Marla) that a nearby panhandler had more money than he did, before calmly strolling into the marble atrium of the Tower, while the panhandler presumably froze to death in the New York winter. The difference was that he was universally understood to be a Rich Man, and thus had the crucial Too Big to Fail sheen that allowed him to simply glide through his string of bankruptcies, the banks (themselves largely just magic tricks of a more traditionally alchemic design) recognizing him as essentially of their kind and taking a series of dramatic haircuts on their loans while offering him ludicrously generous terms like a $450,000 a month "allowance" instead of doing what they would normally do with an actual human being who was that far underwater.

16.

As a result the 90s were a strangely good decade for him. Sure, there were three bankruptcies in four years and two divorces, including his bruising split with Ivana, but all of these served merely to confirm his notion of himself as fundamentally invulnerable. For the most part the years passed in a gentle blur of celebrity. A list of his TV and movie cameo appearances can readily serve as a chronology of low-middlebrow American popular culture across the decade. (To wit: *Home Alone 2*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *The Nanny*, *The Drew Carey Show*, *Spin City*, and *Sex and the City*.)

It is a tone set by his first book of the decade, *The Art of Survival*. Music writer Greil Marcus noted the rise of "survivor" as a term of praise in the mid-to-late seventies, eviscerating the vapidity involved in valorizing the most basic act of not dying. But the book's hardcover title, *Surviving at the Top*, highlights a second, even lamer approach in which the ability of entrenched power to sustain itself is elevated to the realm of mythology. However, mere survival was in the end unsustainable given his competitive streak and zero-sum worldview, and by the decade's end he'd changed from being a survival artist to *The Art of the Comeback*.

17.

To some extent this was simply necessity. The bankruptcies may have been deftly navigated such that his actual losses amounted to a yacht and an ill-

advised attempt to run an airline, but his finances were at times in genuine peril; his meager accomplishment of being born rich and managing not to lose it all was accomplished in genuinely harrowing ways. The worst of it happened in his Atlantic City casino businesses, where things at one point grew tight enough that he humiliated the staff by standing on the floor anxiously watching a Japanese businessman for fear he might win, and at another point had his lawyer deposit a $3M check from Fred at the blackjack table and simply walk out with the chips.

All of this was entirely a disaster of his own making. The collapse of his Atlantic City businesses happened for the very simple reason that he was terrible at running them. He set up three separate casinos with three separate companies, burning his partners by trading up to larger venues until he was heavily competing with himself. His last and largest, the Taj Mahal, was an overpriced behemoth that he financed with junk bonds at interest rates that would have required him to produce better turnover than any other casino in the city. He did not merely make bad deals—he recklessly and systematically self-destructed in self-evidently dumb ways.

18.

Given these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that scratching the surface of his culturally placid decade reveals a deep well of festering ugliness. One can start with the big picture—like his 1993 testimony to Congress on the subject of casinos on Native American reservations in which he attempted to fend off the potential competition to his Atlantic City businesses by claiming that "organized crime is rampant on Indian reservations" and that casinos there would be the biggest scandal since Al Capone, noting that it was "unbelievable" to him that anyone would believe "an Indian chief is going to tell Joey Killer to get off his reservation," a series of claims he then refused to back up with any evidence. When asked by Bill Richardson why he hadn't reported this rampant criminal activity to law enforcement he responded, "That's not my job." (Recall, of course, how he'd built the Tower, a process that gave him no shortage of connections that were essential to his expansion into Atlantic City, which had involved numerous deals with Mafia figures.)

But it's the smaller scale that is more instructive—the sea of unfulfilled invoices to local Atlantic City businesses, millions of dollars for pianos, bartenders, cabinetry, chandeliers, air conditioning, plumbing, and of course massive and gaudy signage. Clinton lined them up for ads, and they're genuinely heartbreaking—a stream of people screwed out of the profit margin on massive sales that in many cases they'd staked their businesses on. Some of

these were legally approved bankruptcy settlements. Others were simple smash-and-grabs—a strategy based on nothing more than throwing Cohn-style legal bluster at small-time businessmen and a bet that he could get away with it more times than not. But more even than that is the fact that whenever he boasts of his comeback and talks about how he got out of Atlantic City at the right time it's clear that he's loving it. He relishes it. It's how he gets his kicks.

19.

By century's end, though, he was getting restless. Having burnt no shortage of bridges in pursuit of the trail of losers he needed in order to feel like he'd won at survival, he was now in the awkward position of having survived. And then, on June 25th, 1999, Fred died. It's not that this was a surprise; his father had been ill since before the third bankruptcy. But even as deep into his Tower-fueled transfiguration as he was, this must have hit him hard, if only because deep down he knew it marked the final passage of the name of his birth. And so he responded with typical oedipalism, taking to Larry King Live for the full hour not four months after his father's death to ostentatiously flirt with a run for the Presidency on Ross Perot's abandoned Reform Party ticket. He assessed the field with ironic pragmatism, reasoning that "I could get the Reform Party nomination. I don't even think it would be that tough. It's going to be Buchanan, and I think Buchanan just blew himself out with the book and his love affair with Adolf Hitler," but he worried whether the Reform Party would actually be viable in the general election.

To be fair, this was not his first flirtation with politics. He was supposedly considered by George Bush for the vice president slot in 1988, although it must be stressed that this was the same era in which Princess Diana considered a Tower appointment and John Barron told the press that Madonna wanted to date him. But he was clearly happy to be seen as the man who was almost Dan Quayle and developed a taste for weighing in ostentatiously on politics, as he did a year later when he took out an ad calling for the Central Park Five to be executed. But this time was different—he went so far as to form an actual Exploratory Committee. The logic is easy enough to see—almost mistakable for genuine human emotion. A grieving son flirts with obvious folly in a posthumous bid to impress his difficult father. And it's fair to say there are ways he's a natural heir to Ross Perot.

All told he stuck around for three months before realizing that Pat Buchanan was skilled at manipulating the material remnants of the Reform Party and that he'd get creamed in the general against Bush and Gore anyway.

He finally withdrew via a New York Times editorial that randomly pilfered the title of Peggy Noonan's Reagan-era memoir *What I Saw at the Revolution* in which he mused that he loved running for president, and might do it again in 2004.

20.

Instead he did *The Apprentice*. This was an obvious enough move. He clearly enjoyed celebrity more than real estate, and his basic existence through the 1990s could fairly be described as anticipating the genre of reality TV. But the fact that he slotted so easily into this new role is as much a testament to Mark Burnett's conception of it as it is to his own skills. Broadly speaking, he was to play a "hard-nosed executive," but what's crucial to his being perfectly suited to the part is the broader context of the Bush era with its panoply of conservative "mavericks" from John McCain to Jack Bauer. The Bush years were fundamentally the Reagan era's reprise as farce, and his status as an unironic Gordon Gekko fit perfectly with the awful spirit of the times. Indeed, the first episode of *The Apprentice* could scarcely be more Bush-era, culminating in the elimination of David, a contestant who obtained an MD and then an MBA, in what's explicitly framed as a triumph of an entrepreneurial attitude over uncharismatic book smarts. In other words, the nerd gets fired, the catch phrase capping off the aesthetic with its unrepentant fetishization of letting the unworthy fail to fend for themselves.

But the real giveaway is the opening credits. On one level they're just part of Burnett's perfectly crafted formula. He was fresh off the massive success of porting a Swedish reality competition to the US as *Survivor*, and he openly subs New York City in for the tropical island, giving his host a monologue that proclaims Manhattan to be "the real jungle" in the midst of a poised bit of post-9/11 NYC porn for red states. (Watch for the moment when the glint off the Statue of Liberty is synchronized to an imperious-sounding choir, though the real tell is when, during his spiel about his big comeback, the phrase "billions of dollars of debt" is matched to a shot of the National Debt Clock on Sixth Avenue.)

21.

9/11, of course, is the weird interjection—the thing that breaks the smooth narrative from would-be Presidential candidate to reality TV host that would otherwise work here. It is not that the terrorist attack particularly troubled him. Even on the day itself he was calmly remarking that this meant his building at 40 Wall Street was now the tallest building in downtown

Manhattan. In the aftermath he made some noise about giving money to charity, didn't do it, and got on with his life like most people who weren't directly affected did, eventually inventing a memory about Muslims celebrating in Jersey City. Later he backed the doomed Twin Towers 2 project with his usual flair by calling a press conference to complain that the design for "Freedom Tower," later One World Trade Center, was "a junkyard, a series of broken-down angles that don't match each other. And we have to live with this for hundreds of years?" But this was just press-hounding; the World Trade Center wasn't the Woolman Rink, and he was firmly on the outside of the process.

The ironic thing about his response is that he clearly understood something that much of the world missed. Aside from the subsequent (and fundamentally separate) war on terror, the largest material effect of 9/11 was the psychogeographic wound dealt to Manhattan—the permanent and traumatic alteration of one of the most iconic skylines in the world. He was a creature birthed from that same psychogeography and understood it instinctively. But this also explains why 9/11 fundamentally derailed his apparent trajectory from 2000 to 2016: it beat him at his own game, manifesting the essence of the Tower better than he could, and forcing him to become something more monstrous yet before he could appease his awful master.

22.

At almost any point in his life the status of the Bush name is a useful point to contrast him with. On the one hand he rose and fell with it in perfect synchronicity. And in a real sense his dispatching of it is the ultimate accomplishment of his life—a regicidal masterstroke unseen in American politics since the joint work of Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, and Jimmy Carter. But beyond that there is the inevitable tension of fundamental similarity. On one level he and George W. Bush were two of a kind: scions of a great name who were in their own ways the second choice to carry that name forward, and who triumphed over their own fundamental incompetence to rise from privilege to greater privilege. But Bush's story always coupled his ascendency with a deeply traditionalist narrative of born-again Christianity. In this approach the period of material power is marked by a kind of personal asceticism, with suitability for power being demonstrated in part by the fact that one no longer indulges in the fratboy fantasies of youth.

He, meanwhile, viewed his *Apprentice*-fueled ascendency as the occasion for an extended adolescence, entering what we might think of as his "grab them

by the pussy" period. Although three of the seven winners of the show were women it's clear that he viewed the competition as having fundamentally different male and female divisions, with female contestants engaged in something with a clear relationship to his existing line of beauty contests. Behind-the-scenes accounts reveal him repeatedly discussing female contestants' supposed fuckability with male ones in the "boardroom," and while there are multiple male contestants along the lines of David there are no female contestants who cannot be described as conventionally attractive young women.

The first episode of *The Apprentice* makes no effort to hide the fundamentally gendered nature of its construction. The female judge is introduced as "a killer with many men buried in her wake," and mere moments later it's explained that in order to find out whether women have a harder time in business than men he'll be splitting the sixteen contestants into gendered teams. The first four episodes then have the women sweep their tasks, generally winning via the unabashed use of their sexuality in making sales, and leading to the elimination of four male contestants who are all, like David, portrayed as fundamentally "weak" (as evidenced by their being beaten by women). In the fifth episode the by-then lopsided teams are integrated and the next seven eliminations are women; the final female contestant avoided being on the losing team the next week and made it to the final four, where she was finally fired for not being likeable enough.

23.

But while the gender issues of *The Apprentice* are most conspicuous, its grappling with race was in many regards the better auger of the future. The two finalists in the first season of The Apprentice were Bill Rancic, a telegenic anodyne man who would have been played by Walton Goggins if he were for any reason interesting enough to make a movie about, and Kwame Jackson, one of the show's two black contestants. Mirroring the structure of Burnett's other hit, the final task involved a number of eliminated contestants returning and working as assistants for the two finalists as they organized large events. Five of the six contestants were roughly as interesting as Kwame and Bill themselves, which is to say not at all, but the sixth was Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, these days mononymic as simply Omarosa.

Although she was eliminated in the ninth episode, if he can actually be said to have taken on an apprentice at any stage of his career (and certainly if one can be said to have emerged from the show) it is Omarosa. Her role within *The Apprentice* was as a carefully cast heel—a deliciously disingenuous villain who

would ostentatiously backstab her fellow contestants with aplomb. And she did. She's the best thing in the first season by a mile, considerably outstripping the host, who is frequently awkward and clearly reliant on his script. At the heart of her success is the fact that she embodies his ethos perfectly. She insists she was hard-done by the show's editing, but if so it's because of a very basic fact, namely that she unrepentantly lied her head off throughout the competition. She demonstrates not a shred of loyalty to any cause other than her own advancement, which is blatantly constructed only in a moment-to-moment sense of answering the question "am I at this very moment fucking someone over?" If for some unexpected reason the answer is "no," like him she will go to heroic lengths to change that fact. She is one of the defining pleasures of reality television as a genre. (Both fittingly and ironically, the show emphasizes her experience as a staffer in the Clinton White House.)

So anyway, Kwame drew the short straw and got the second draft of the six assistants, which meant that he was going to end up stuck with Omarosa if Bill didn't want her, which of course he didn't. And sure enough during the finale she randomly kidnapped Jessica Simpson so that Kwame couldn't introduce her to the boss when he wanted to meet her, so that was it for Kwame, and Bill became the Apprentice and spent a year managing the construction of the International Hotel and Tower in Chicago. But the real point in all of this is that the black finalist got sandbagged by a character defined by her status as the angry black woman. Which is, in the end, the fundamental reason for his inability to recognize Omarosa as the closest thing to a genuine soulmate he's ever going to have: he can't conceive of the possibility that his true apprentice is a black woman.

24.

So it's no surprise Obama got under his skin. Initially he was complimentary, praising the new president (and specifically his appointment of Clinton as Secretary of State) as late as December of 2009. But he must have looked at the early days of the Tea Party with a certain fondness. Rick Santelli's famous February 2009 rant that kickstarted the movement would have been right up his alley, for instance—angrily blaming the people who bought subprime mortgages, decrying the valuation of the collective over the individual, and complaining that since this happened "they're driving '54 Chevys, maybe the last great car to come out of Detroit" in Cuba. Between that and the assertion that the people on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange represented "a pretty good statistical cross-section of America, the silent majority," it's clear he and Santelli are two of a kind.

Past that, his perspective on the financial crisis was at an odd remove. The International Hotel and Tower in Chicago (the building Bill Rancic nominally managed) was the only project into which he'd actually invested enough real money to have any real exposure to the crisis, and he handled that with his usual Cohn-style tactics. Beyond that, sure, he'd managed the impressively dumb feat of starting a mortgage company in 2006, teaming up with a guy named E.J. Ridings who'd been introduced to him by his son, and who turned out to have substantially fabricated his CV, but that was basically a licensing deal. This was how things worked post-*Apprentice*—he sold his name to other businessmen and sat on the sidelines. Ridings wasn't even particularly unusual among the people he sold his name to, the pool of people who thought his brand was a valuable marketing tool generally being restricted to those with even less business sense or ethics than he had. So all his flirtations with the mortgage industry would have done was to confirm his sense of himself as being above the fray, and of the crisis being other people's problem. Indeed, in his overall sense of ethics the fact that his company sold the bad mortgages would have proven Santelli's point: it's the people dumb enough to buy them that were at fault, not him. His job in such a situation was to make a lot of money, as he was happy to proclaim in the first debate. So to regularly see people like him blamed for what he no doubt thought was the largely exaggerated financial crisis would have made him feel deeply aggrieved. Especially given that he was being thrown under the bus by a black man.

25.

His racism has always been the sort that said things like, "I've always had a great relationship with the blacks," and he even means it, which is to say that his affection for them is genuine. It's not an accident that the intro music to *The Apprentice* was a version of The O'Jays "For The Love of Money" edited so that it's no longer actually about money's evil nature, or that his rallies feature bizarre poetic readings of Al Wilson's "The Snake." But his relationship with them is fundamentally framed by the Jamaica Estates—they are the people he goes down the hill from the palace to see. Like money, they are fundamentally a means of keeping score. But this function is performed by their subservience, hence, for example, Season Four Apprentice winner Randal Pinkett spending his first day sitting while his new boss meticulously looked through all the press clippings about himself.

And so in 2011 he turned on Obama, flirting provocatively with birtherism in a March 2011 interview on *Good Morning America* while doing his traditional pretending to run for president. He was hardly the first to do so—politicians

like Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin, and Michele Bachmann all flirted with it to various degrees. But he was by some margin the most rawly famous person to indulge in the conspiracy theory, and *Good Morning America* was among the highest platforms the theory had ascended to. This got him attention, and by mid-April he was getting daily briefings on the "conspiracy" from WorldNetDaily founder and general conspiracy nut Joseph Farah.

It's hardly surprising that he loved the attention. He always loves attention, after all. If a rush of people cheer on something he says he's basically incapable of not saying it again or of pushing it further to get more and louder cheers. But it's a mistake to treat this as a cynically strategic pandering to what would eventually become his electoral base. There was nothing strategic about it. It was nothing more or less than the inevitable consequence of his particular pathologies set loose in the particular political context of the first black president slamming rich real estate speculators.

26.

The 2012 run was another bust, with polling showing that he'd have a tough time getting to the nomination. And past that, the crux of his problem with Obama was that the president existed far outside his comfort zone. For all his venom, he was unlikely to relish the idea of going head-to-head with him. And so he bided his time, sinking deeper into the morass of nativist conspiracy theories and acquiring a new circle of fringe-right yes-men to hand him his script. Meanwhile, the humiliations piled up. A 2014 Buzzfeed profile in which he gave McKay Coppins access as he flitted about New Hampshire generating hype for another presidential run led to him being soundly mocked by a headline calling it "36 Hours On The Fake Campaign Trail" and by zingers like that he's "about as likely to run for president in his lifetime as he is to accept follicular defeat." This was followed by a January of 2015 appearance in front of the Television Critics Association winter press tour in which he claimed *The Apprentice* was the number one show on television, only to be laughed at by the audience, and when he walked his claim back to the number one show on Mondays, a reporter jibed, "What if I told you you're losing to Mike and Molly every week?" He was, in effect, backed into a corner —surrounded by a new army of far-right sycophants and painfully aware that he was becoming a punchline. And so he took the only option left to him: in June of 2015, he finally announced an actual, honest-to-god presidential run.

No shortage of people have speculated over whether he actually wanted to win. A perfectly plausible theory is that he was following the same path as candidates like Herman Cain and Mike Huckabee whereby the campaign is

mainly a tool for building an e-mail list of people to sell shit to. It's entirely likely he was planning to do something along those lines, perhaps launching a Fox News competitor at his most ambitious. But this seems impossible—he cannot have wanted to lose. The problem is really that he wanted to win the presidency as opposed to being president. The story of him offering John Kasich control of both foreign and domestic policy while he made America great again may well have been a spot of mischief from the Kasich camp, but it's nevertheless devastatingly plausible. Literally no aspects of the job seemed likely to appeal to him.

27.

Whatever he may have wanted, his campaign became a runaway success. More than perhaps any other aspect of our argument here, this is a topic that has been extensively picked over in think pieces, the usual argument of which is some variation of "the Republican Party laid the groundwork for his rise." And that's true enough—eight years of pure opposition politics, often framed on racial lines, and on top of a decades-long strategy of stoking white resentment left the party vulnerable to a populist insurgent. With a field of candidates that was at once overcrowded and mediocre, 2016 was an obvious year for it to happen. And the result was always going to have a fascist sheen with a white nationalist core. The more interesting question is why he, of all people, should be so well-suited to being the figurehead atop the rising tide of horror—why an Ivari International hair weave should become the toothbrush moustache of its day.

On one level, the answer is that for all his incompetence there are in fact a strange handful of things he's good at, and this is one of them. Like replacing a tropical island in a well-defined reality TV format, quasi-fascist figurehead is a job that suits, if not his talents, at least his perversions. His always shaky relationship with any kind of truth or objective reality was by this point completely devastated; he was both willing and eager to throw himself into the passionate belief of whatever bit of outright lunacy the base felt validated by just so long as they cheered for him. As a racist, sexist bully himself, he could relate to them. And he was, if nothing else, a genuinely ideological autocrat who really did believe that he alone could save America. This was enough to establish a larger base within the narrow pool of Republican primary voters than the flaccid campaigns of Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, or the others.

28.

On another level, the answer is that this is what the Tower always wanted—what its Ruined Modernism always aspired to be. As forms to grotesquely parody went, the failed Great Man was always going to be its path of least resistance. The man whose name it had eaten had always wanted to play the role of Charles Foster Kane if he'd gotten himself a different woman, oblivious to the fact that this story would still be a tragedy. And so the thing to which he was host gave it to him. His downfall was simply plucked from history; the same ruin that modernism itself had faced.

And then the other half of its ruination, its black transfiguration into pure image. A perversion without fetishes, the flimflam man staggers down a late-night cable alley. Steadying himself on the side of the building, he tries to catch his breath, an empty-headed fool with no ideas because there are no things, knowing that there's a something he should say, the best word, even as the language burns to ash in his throat. He's falling, being without becoming in all its ontological absurdity, collapsing into concrete embrace of the wall beside him, the strings of a thirty-year old bad deal coiling down like snakes around the useless thing he thought had been his body, and he can smell the burning flesh of the twenty-first century as he presses down upon it, no puppet, no puppet, you're the puppet. What else was he ever going to become but this?

29.

President, apparently. This would, at first glance, seem to require we extend the argument. All of the worst and most destructive things he does in his life are going to take place during his Presidency, and so this period seems like it should dominate any account of him. But while splattering on the pavement is the most spectacular part of a fall, it is ultimately nothing more than an inevitable consequence wholly defined by the descent. The basic fact of him remains. He's an idiot drifting through history, suspended between the updraft of money's tendency to sustain itself and the downdraft of his fundamental incompetence. Nothing can change this. Nor can the system be somehow rendered stable. Indeed, the presidency inherently marks a terminus for both forces. He has, at last, indisputably become a Great Man of History. Now all that remains is to define that in all its singular bigliness, and all that remains to define it with is his skill at overly predictable pratfalls. There is no way for this to end well for him or anybody else.

It is a sufficiently brutal comeuppance that it is fleetingly possible to actually feel a moment of human empathy for him. Moments where it becomes clear abound: his day-one dispatching of Sean Spicer to rebut entirely

true claims about his crowd sizes, his long and agonizing attempt not to walk back his claims that Obama put a tapp on his phone, or just the frustrated, petulant figure portrayed in countless *New York Times* and *Washington Post* profiles. But it's perhaps most clear in his facial expression; the wounded animal stare of a man desperate to stop knowing that he's fucking up everything he ever worked for. You almost feel sorry for him.

Two things, ultimately, prevent this. The first is simply that he is a genuinely awful person, and no amount of empathy can possibly outweigh the schadenfreude. The second is a basic principle of psychogeography: as the king goes, so goes the land.

30.

What of those of us who just have to live in the ruins, then? Good news can be hard to come by. On the most basic level, the game is up entirely on the basis of Scott Pruitt being installed at the EPA. A successful response to climate change was a question mark even if we actually attempted one. Four to eight years of the exact opposite of that is a mortal wound to the current social order. But from within the gap between injury and death, the full scope of what that might mean is impossible to do anything more than speculate about.

More broadly, the historical precedent for incompetence being a useful check on would-be autocrats is minimal to non-existent, at least in terms of the general population. Sure, his capacity for shooting himself in the foot can and will frustrate his agenda from time to time, but his agenda isn't the only horrific thing about him. Just as ominous, if not moreso, is the corrosive effect of his very presence. This includes, obviously, the material problems of emboldened white supremacy, long-term damage to social norms, and, most importantly, the human misery inflicted by a government whose law enforcement agencies are under zero pressure towards basic humanity or decency. But it also includes the raw allostatic load of living under his rule; the basic psychological wear and tear of waking up every morning in a post-fact world dominated by a bullying narcissist. The act of living in a world where the basic validity of your identity is contingent and perpetually imperiled, where the very definition of "fact" is in dispute, and where a brutish logic of dominance and humiliation pervades the entire social order.

There is no upside here. Nothing makes it better. Even the good outcomes are destructive beyond easy comprehension. One is left clutching at self-evidently absurd thresholds of acceptability—maybe it won't actually be a

nuclear war—the very contemplation of which represents a fundamental degradation. The truth is cold, brutal, and inescapable: we've lost.

31.

The reality is that "what happened" is mostly not worth excessive analysis. A number of deeply idiosyncratic contingencies including a deeply flawed Democratic candidate, a bizarre intervention from James Comey, and an extensive Russia-funded propaganda effort collaborated to make the core votes that racist authoritarianism can gather but generally not go beyond sufficient to win, and here we are. But the question asks itself regardless of the quality of answer.

Let us at least admit, then, that he made the 2016 election a genuine democratic choice—a decisive referendum on accelerationism. Clinton was the candidate of stasis,. Like Jeb Bush or a new Fantastic Four movie she was the revival of a brand nobody was particularly nostalgic for. She offered nothing other than the continuation of present circumstances with all their sense of imminent eschatology. And his sheer destructive potential offered a credible alternative to this. A vote for him was at least a vote for climax.

Unasked in a binary choice between accelerationism and the status quo is the question of direction. This is where things inevitably go wrong, not just in the sense that he sees the overwhelming majority of his voters the same way he saw small businesses in Atlantic City. The only acceleration he can possibly offer is around the closed and sclerotic loop of his collapsing psyche.

A different metaphor, then. There is a fetish in which a man's genitals are extensively teased and aroused, edging him to the brink of release over and over again until, in the instant between the point of no return and his actual orgasm, all stimulation is abruptly removed. In one oft-videotaped variation he will ejaculate spectacularly, a massive gobbet of semen arcing uselessly into thin air. In others, further negative stimulation (a swift blow to the testicles is common) is applied. In either case, however, the point is the cruelty of an unsatisfying climax—the agonizing frustration of acceleration's crashing halt. A ruined orgasm for a ruined modernism.

No Law for the Lions and Many Laws for the Oxen is Liberty: A Subjective Calculation of the Value of the Austrian School

Written with Jack Graham

Thanks to Daniel Harper, for repeatedly pointing in the right directions

"There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being give freedom from. Don't underrate it." —Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale

"…all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts…"—Carl Schmitt, Political Theology

Let's start from first principles.

Murray Rothbard, in his 1976 account of the praxeological method that underpins the Austrian School of economics, proclaims his to be that "individual human beings act." And since he begins with an axiom, he asserts, "all the propositions that can be deduced from this axiom must also be true." Conspicuously unmentioned, however, are all of the propositions that are required to reach this axiom. It is, after all, recognizable (whether it wants to be or not) as a restatement of classical liberalism, a fact that is reinforced by Rothbard's immediate restatement of the axiom as "individuals engage in conscious actions towards chosen goals."

And yet there is nothing obvious about classical liberalism. Every part of this allegedly "primordial fact" is in fact dependent on a mass of contested epistemologies and assumptions about the nature of consciousness and free will. Meanwhile, a wealth of alternatives lie quietly ignored, or, in some cases, loudly so. Rothbard, for instance, immediately distinguishes these actions from "reflexive, or knee-jerk, behavior, which is not directed towards goals." But this is transparently silly; when one pulls one's hand away from a hot stove it is clearly a reflexive action, and yet it is also clearly directed towards a goal. This also highlights the strangeness of declaring that goals are "chosen," a problem that only deepens a paragraph later when Rothbard notes that "since he wishes to attain these goals, they must be valuable to him; accordingly he must have values that govern his choices." What are we to make of the notion of an

externally governed choice? Or, even more strangely, an internally governed one, as "values" are apparently a part of the self separate from consciousness and free will but simultaneously governing them? Whatever it is, it's going to fit awkwardly with the heroic individual at the heart of Rothbard's liberal praxeology.

And that's not even getting to the unmentioned alternatives. There's determinism, obviously, although Rothbard at least intends to be rejecting that. But Rothbard also visibly has a dog in the compatibilism vs. incompatibilism fight, sleepwalking into Schopenhauerian compatibilism (as Einstein paraphrases it, "man can do what he wills but cannot will what he wills") with his notion of value governance, a move one strongly suspects he does not actually want to make. And this in turn ignores the wealth of options that don't privilege metaphysics, such as ecological views of human action as a (perhaps even the) key component of a larger biological system. Notably, any and all of these approaches, many of which are only slight variations on Rothbard's axiom, in turn have propositions deducible from them that are just as compellingly true as Rothbard's, but often radically contrary. For instance, approaches that situate the axiom "individual human beings act" within the context of the anthropocene extinction quickly produce the proposition "so they should probably stop that."

Ah yes, the anthropocene… or the capitalocene as some have said it should be called. And here we get to the nub of the matter. Because capitalism is the system Rothbard—and the entire Austrian School—is trying to justify, and it is also the system that—contra his wealth of assumptions—circumscribes a lot of what people do. Individuals can act all they want. They won't make the end of the world go away, any more than their freedom to quit work can make them free to not starve—especially when the system that surrounds their individual actions convulses and crashes to the ground. Individual action is a singularly bad explanation for why, ten years ago, global society itself teetered on the brink of collapse because some people were sold mortgages they couldn't afford.

RationalWiki notes, amusingly, that these days you can barely talk about economics online without encountering Austrian School ideologues trumpeting their contention that Austrian-flavoured financier Peter Schiff predicted the crash of 2007-08. As RationalWiki points out, this isn't especially impressive. Loads of people did. And Austrians are constantly predicting crashes. They're worse than Marxists on that score, who, as the joke goes, predicted four out of the last three crashes. But the real irony is the idea of proving Austrian ideas true using evidence, given that the praxeological basis

of Austrian thought means that the Austrians not only admit that their ideas are not based on evidence, but claim that evidence cannot prove or disprove anything anyway.

Consequently, Rothbard—reliant as he supposedly is on praxeology—also has difficulties coming up with a convincing account of these rather pressing issues. Or rather he would do, if that was what he was really aiming for. Well… he's not aiming for anything anymore. He's dead. And hopefully enduring a Dantean contrapasso, probably involving the eternal accusing stares of all the *real* anarchists who died in the Spanish Civil War. Alas, his approach lives on. There is a spectre haunting the anthropocene—the spectre of the Austrians. But what haunts the haunter? What awful gothic horror might we find interred beneath Rothbard's shining praxeological edifice?

If that's what we're investigating, then we really *do* need to start with first principles.

Concave Mirror

Praxeology claims to be a method, but it's actually a method of claims. It is an *affect*, an aesthetic, a way of making assertions. Famously, beneath its rhetoric, it amounts to a wholesale rejection of empiricism, made all the more impudent because the praxeologists make a habit of lambasting others (rightly or wrongly) for doing what they themselves do proudly. They began this, tellingly, by attacking Marxism, which was projection, as we'll see.

Of course, it's not that the praxeologists don't think there are observable laws in how the world works. After all, they adumbrate their own. It's just that they think all such laws arise from human behaviour that arises from subjective perceptions. So the laws cannot be scientifically comprehensible via statistical modelling, or even empirical observation.

As Ludwig von Mises, founder of what could be called the 'second generation' of Austrians, wrote in his deeply silly book *Human Action*:

> Praxeology is a theoretical and systematic, not a historical, science. Its scope is human action as such, irrespective of all environmental, accidental, and individual circumstances of the concrete acts. Its cognition is purely formal and general without reference to the material content and the particular features of the actual case. It aims at knowledge valid for all instances in which the conditions exactly correspond to those implied in its assumptions and inferences. Its statements and propositions are not derived from experience. They are, like those of logic and mathematics, a priori. They are not subject to verification or falsification on the ground of experience and facts. They are both logically and temporally antecedent to any comprehension of historical facts.

Mises is unambiguous about this: not only shouldn't you try to verify or falsify praxeological deductions; you can't.

In a 2010 post entitled 'From Mises to Carlyle: my sick journey to the dark side of the force', Moldbug declares, "Mises is almost never wrong." Of course he isn't. It's easy to never be wrong if you never say anything. Even Friedrich von Hayek, Mises' protégé and successor, who nevertheless formally rejected praxeology, claimed, in *Individualism and Economic Order*:

> All that the theory of the social sciences attempts is to provide a technique of reasoning which assists us in connecting individual facts, but which, like logic or mathematics, is not about the facts. It can, therefore… never be verified or falsified by reference to facts.

That isn't to say it doesn't seize upon anything that looks like proof when it can, but that's because it's an aesthetic pretending to be a method, and so the occasional scob of evidence makes nice decoration. In this, it resembles nothing so much as casuistry—religious apologetics, scholasticism—preserved into late modernity. As we'll see, this isn't a coincidence. Nor is it a coincidence that praxeological argumentation strongly resembles the reactionary YouTube sceptic's technique of spewing unfounded assertions that conform to his sense of truthiness, while constantly patting himself on the back for being "rational."

In some ways, the praxeological view of people is an improvement on the mythical 'homo economicus' of mainstream economics, the perfectly-informed rational actor who maximizes utility all over the place with the benefit of his handy pocket preference scale (y'know, like we all have). For the Austrians, even the market irrationality they admit to is crucial to all social order. Such order is spontaneously generated by the market, and no other way of doing things is moral or workable. And here we see the anthropocene looming again.

There is some attraction and superficial plausibility in the idea that you can't quantify human actors with statistics, etc. This is part of why this ideology is so attractive to people who are in vested in their own individualism, rugged or otherwise. But, of course, the cult of individualism is based on the idea that the behaviour of *some* humans can *always* be predicted. The individualist is, by definition, the guy who stands apart from the common herd. He (because it is a gendered subject) likes to wax ruefully about accepting the reality of what 'humans' are really like as a way of ruling out utopias—but he implicitly separates humans into the schlubs and the inspired. Even the superficially liberatory idea of 'self-ownership' espoused by many praxeological Austrians and libertarians is a coy way of conceptualising people as commodities, which is probably how these supposed lovers of liberty so often end up defending slavery.

The excuse for this partiality to the rights and privileges of the ruling class, and the attendant indifference to those of the subject class (whatever the social content of these categories may be at any given time), is that private property is the basis of liberty. But this manages the impressive feat of being both a tautology and a contradiction. It's a tautology because it assumes the point under question. It's a contradiction because if private property, while conferring liberty on its possessors, also structurally curtails the liberty of the propertyless, then the concept of liberty becomes a luxury to be enjoyed by a few. From here the libertarian is inescapably pushed towards somehow justifying the inequity, towards explaining "Why yes, it *is* a luxury to be enjoyed by a few—and quite right too!" The justifications are easy to find. You need only look at the many and drastic *specific* inequities generated by capitalist society, generalise from them, and amputate history and context so that they appear to have no cause save for some primordial fact or another.

The necessary amputation of context is especially striking in the case of the libertarians, because a whole host of the inequities they seize upon to justify hierarchy are based on the imperialism they profess to be against. It helps that one can be against today's racist wars—though not on the grounds of anti-racism, except of the most specious variety—while quietly accepting and utilising the racial inequities inherited from the racist imperialism of the past. As usual, reactionary thinking is dependant upon amnesia.

Engels eviscerated this deduction of ideological conclusions from supposedly disinterested maxims back in 1878, in his coruscating polemic against the anti-Marxist social democrat Eugen Dühring:

> And when such an ideologist constructs morality and law from the concept, or the so-called simplest elements of "society", instead of from the real social relations of the people round him, what material is then available for this construction? Material clearly of two kinds: first, the meagre residue of real content which may possibly survive in the abstractions from which he starts and, secondly, the content which our ideologist once more introduces from his own consciousness. And what does he find in his consciousness? For the most part, moral and juridical notions which are a more or less accurate expression (positive or negative, corroborative or antagonistic) of the social and political relations amidst which he lives; perhaps also ideas drawn from the literature on the subject; and, as a final possibility, some personal idiosyncrasies. Our ideologist may turn and twist as he likes, but the historical reality which he cast out at the door comes in again at the window, and while he thinks he is framing a doctrine of morals and law for all times and for all worlds, he is in fact only fashioning an image of the conservative or revolutionary tendencies of his day — an image which is distorted because it has been torn from its real basis and, like a reflection in a concave mirror, is standing on its head.

Dühring was a positivist, so his flavour of bullshit was scientific reductionism. But it's almost uncanny how Engels seems to predict Rothbard. Reductionism's gonna reduce.

By this point in the book, we know better than to take this sort of "from first premises" reasoning as a sincere account of a thought process. Rothbard did not actually begin interrogating the consequences of individual liberty and then arrive with basilisk-like jouissance at a complete economic system that would be routinely bankrolled by libertarians seeking validation despite its self-evident lack of even the merest vestiges of sanity. But we also understand that this process isn't simply about arriving at a predetermined conclusion. The urge for a blank slate is just as much about trying to create a system untainted by some form of error or another as it is about creating one that comes to a particular conclusion. But the urge is old, and possibly unsatisfiable. Rothbard, after all, is one of the later voices in the Austrian School. Its origins lie a century earlier, in the marginal revolution of the 1870s.

The Praxis of Praxeology

In 1867, Karl Marx published the first volume of *Capital*, his devastating critique of capitalist production. In 1871, the working people of Paris rose in revolt and seized control of their city in the first proletarian revolution in history. The Commune was almost immediately put down in a counter-revolution which involved mass murder, mass imprisonment, and mass deportation, but the spectre was well and truly haunting Europe. From 1873 onwards, capitalism tumbled into what was called at the time 'the Great Depression' (a phrase which would have to be reused). You could almost hear their intellectual wing hunching over their books and balance sheets and financial papers mumbling "How can we claim capitalism is fair? Dammit, I'm going to get this!"

The solution they selected was marginal utility, which was simultaneously and independently developed by William Stanley Jevons, Marie-Espirit-Léon Walras, and Carl Menger. Menger was Austrian, and so were the major thinkers who picked up his distinctive iteration of marginalism, hence, the Austrian School. But the fact that this idea occurred more less simultaneously to several men of similar social position at roughly the same time in history is proof that something more complicated, more socially and historically embedded is going on here than just individual human beings acting.

There is little evidence that the founders of marginalism were particularly concerned about socialism as such. Intellectually, they were responding to what they perceived—not unjustifiably—as deep problems with the classical labour theory of value (LTV). Having said that, the rejection of the LTV was undoubtedly a result of the continued rise and power of the capitalist system, and of potential challenges to it. Bourgeois economists already wished to deny

the obvious: that capital exploits labour. Marginalism came to be adopted as a hegemonic ideology by bourgeois society because of, well, its utility.

Utility is the benefit or satisfaction a commodity provides to a buyer and/or consumer. *Marginal* utility is the value to the consumer of an additional unit of the commodity. Marginalism thus sees value as determined by a consumer's need or desire for a particular benefit or satisfaction, mediated by the supply of it.

For all the detours and distortions along the way, there is a clear path leading from this to Rothbard's declaration that "individual human beings act." It's based on the same rampant subjectivism masquerading as disinterested rational deduction that is the entire basis of bourgeois economics. Rothbard's tradition simply takes it to an extreme, or, if you prefer, takes its implications seriously.

Menger, in contrast with Walras and Jevons, rejected mathematics, arguing that economics should focus on essences rather than quantities—a view that essentially founded his distinct 'school', and which also served to make him the one of the trio whose implicit opposition to Marx ran deepest. But this view also meant that at the very birth of marginal utility there is a built-in schism, with Menger ending up as bourgeois economics' equivalent of Salazar Slytherin. There is a great extent to which Menger would fail to recognise much of what has come from the school of thought he founded, but this beginning is nonetheless the basis of the Austrian School's peculiar quiddity, that of heterodoxy arising from a more intense orthodoxy.

The other basis of the School is a rejection of socialism in all its forms. But even that wasn't inevitable. The early Austrian School was actually subject to a split between left and right. The right won, but the split echoed onwards in endless reiterations. Even Hayek apparently had one of those quintessential left-wing 'phases' in youth that inoculates a certain kind of person for life. (Indeed, you could almost say the same of the Austrian School itself.) As late as the third volume of *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (published in 1979, a long time after his youthful socialist phase) he makes noises about how Universal Basic Income may even be "a necessary part of the Great Society."

What's interesting about these concessions is that they are predicated upon the assumption that 'the poor are always with us.' It's only a short step from assuming this is true to wanting to make it stays true. The praxis of praxeology, one could call it.

Reproducing the Concrete

For historically contingent reasons, the Austrian School was the strand of marginalism that took direct aim at Marx. But before we get into this, let's square away some things about Marx.

Boiled right down, Marx sees value—in the economic sense—as a social relation created by capitalism. Capitalism makes human social labour (i.e. the labour we don't do for ourselves) abstract by forcing it to be as efficient as possible, because inefficient production is not profitable. Employers need to compete for profit to survive. Labour is only profitable to the employer if it doesn't go beyond the average amount of time it takes to make something under prevailing conditions, what Marx calls 'Socially Necessary Labour Time.' Crudely, if your workers take an hour longer to make a widget than the average amount of time it takes to manufacture widgets, that's a wasted hour that produces no profit, and hence no economic value. Such an hour is unproductive. It's the overall amount of productive labour done—which is an abstraction—that forms the 'objective substance' of the commodity's value in exchange. Life in capitalism is thus dominated by socially-produced abstractions. For instance, you are watched and timed when at work. Capitalism pays you for time, in which you are expected to 'work' in the abstract sense, in the sense of expending your ability to work—your 'labour power.' You're paid for the hours you spend doing whatever you're told. This system dominates your life as a dull compulsion. Also, the fact that you, the worker, do more labour in a day than you're paid for—because, generally, you are paid about what it takes to reproduce your ability to work, not what it takes to buy everything you make or do in a day—you are being exploited. You create 'surplus value' by doing more work during the day than you're paid for, and this goes into the pocket of the capitalist to be reinvested by him into production, thus into the system that exploits you. He has to do this, to invest in new machinery, etc, to make production more efficient and thus more profitable. Further ironies debauch from this, and we will look at them later.

The reader needn't accept this account. The point is that it is neither a vulgarly objective account nor a vague and subjective one. It admits that value is a mental construct, but one that is 'real' because it has a real social basis and real social effects. Value, for Marx, is neither a thing nor an essence, neither quality nor spirit. It is a social reality because of what humans actually do. (This argument applies to most things leftists call social constructs—a phrase that does not mean "nebulous and unreal," but rather "best understood in terms of lived experience than in woolly metaphysics.")

For Marx, socialism would be the transcendence of value, but I prefer the more provocative phrase: the destruction of value. A socialist society, as Marx

intimates throughout his writings, for instance in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, would not produce value in its current socially constructed sense because it would not produce socially for profit. It would not reduce all human social labour to abstract labour precisely because it wouldn't have to make production as efficient, and thus as profitable, as possible. A socialist society, for Marx, would thus definitely *not* be a society such as the former USSR, or the UK run by Corbyn. Those are basically capitalist economies—complete with wage workers who produce commodities and a ruling class who extract surplus value from those workers in the process of production—run by a socialist party at the head of a powerful state. In socialism as Marx conceived it the working class would be in power because it would collectively control the means of production. And as the working class is the vast majority, this would effectively eliminate the ruling class in the old sense of an exploitative minority of bosses. The state as an expression of the power of ruling classes would wither away. Whatever you think of these ideas, they do not correspond to the caricature of Marx's idea of socialism that is widely taken for granted.

The other thing to understand about Marx is that he does not deduce his conclusions from axioms, as many—including, outrageously, his Austrian critics—have claimed. Indeed, he starts off *doubting* the LTV because of the same problems that caused the marginalists to doubt it, He discovers his renovation of the LTV from the practical example of capitalism, from workers struggles, and from long and hard study in the British Library.

Certainly, the opening of *Capital* uses a high level of abstraction in the description of the commodity and value. But Marx is using abstractions in order to gradually build up an increasingly complex picture. As Marx says in the *Grundrisse*, the vast series of notebooks he scribbled out as he prepared to write *Capital*, "…the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being."

Marginalism, on the other hand, simply sets up abstractions and then mistakes them for reality. As a result, the orthodoxy in bourgeois economics which gradually arose from marginalism—now known as 'mainstream' or 'neoclassical' economics—became obsessed with mathematical models, devising ever more arcane ways to track consumer behaviour, supply and demand curves, etc. Theoretically detached from the objective and the material, and connected to business as a client, mainstream economics has become—to a large extent—an ideological discourse. So it has come full circle, fulfilling the basic aim of finding a replacement for the classical LTV.

But, as noted, the Austrian version of marginalism that branched off from Menger is based on the rejection of mathematical models, and has thus always been schismatic. Clearly a form of bourgeois ideology, it is also curiously self-exiled. The mainstream treats the Austrians as their bit on the side, only calling them late at night when they need something they're not getting at home. Many Austrian ideas have been adopted by the mainstream, but generally their policy recommendations have not—probably because, being based on an extreme form of market subjectivism, they are not useful to actually existing capitalism. This is not to say that they haven't had a profound impact on the real world. We owe neoliberalism to Hayek more than any other individual. (Gee, thanks.) But, as we'll see, today's capitalism is so unsatisfactory to the dogmatists of pure Austrian theory, so divergent from its axioms, that many of them consider it de facto socialism. And they are determined to do something about that.

Cycles and Roundabouts

With a few notable exceptions, most mainstream marginalists have addressed Marx by not addressing him. For historical reasons, the early Austrians, under the leadership of Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, were the ones who went on the attack. Many of their most important ideas arose from these attacks. Böhm-Bawerk's theory of 'roundaboutness' in production—a key Austrian tenet—is an attempt to explain profit without admitting the existence of exploitation. Crudely, Böhm-Bawerk claims that profit is, essentially, a reward for waiting. Since value is entirely subjective, and since we value what we have now over what we may have in the future, those who have goods but 'invest' them in production (rather than selling or consuming them now) are rewarded with profit. Profit is deferred gratification, if you like. How very Protestant.

You'll notice something else: the theory is dependent on fetishizing the choices of people who have property. Capitalists choose whether to spend or save, and Austrians see this choice as fundamental to liberty. Liberty is thus, by definition, that which is enjoyed by those who have this choice to make. This is how Moldbug and Thiel's view that democracy is incompatible with liberty arises. A democracy is a society in which the mass of the population—who are, by definition, mostly without property—can shape policy so that it curtails the freedom of the propertied to make their choices. In a free society—by their definition—the capitalists get to make their choices unfettered. The

Austrians say that if unburdened by pesky 'special claims'—i.e. trade unions and welfare and governments—the choices of the propertied will pan out.

The Austrians—leery of the possibility of planning, which seemed to lurk in the neoclassical notion of market actors with perfect information—developed a conception of the market as a sort of information-carrying mechanism. It is not really individuals who know things; they just respond subjectively to what the market does. It is the market which contains and transmits information, via prices. The Austrians thus ramp up commodity fetishism—the tendency, identified by Marx, of capitalist society to grant 'life' to things that it produces—past even mainstream marginalism.

It's worth stressing certain things here. The idea is developed to escape the idea of markets being comprehensible by individual people, and thus directable. The theory follows the ideological impulse. The faith in price signals then becomes central to the Austrian attack on planned economies, which—as we'll see—was another instance of the ideology directing the theory.

For a philosophy supposedly based on human freedom, there is surprisingly little room here for real human agency. Individual human beings act, but they can't direct the world—except blindly, in their own self-interest, and when themselves directed by market signals. And only some human beings' actions are really significant anyway. But even here, the efficient managing comes down to responding to information we are fed by an impersonal and unknowable source of that might as well be God for all we can understand or influence it. The propertied will sometimes misinterpret the signals being sent. When this happens, the market will winnow out such mistakes via processes that, though often called Darwinian, are actually better described as Calvinist. As we will see, not only do Austrians consider this the best and only system, they also implicitly attach religious significance to it. Having 'free will' becomes all about interpreting correctly that which is revealed to us by an unseen higher power which, though essentially benevolent in effect, is actually impersonal, and ready to punish if displeased. The religiose affect is in perfect alignment with the praxeological method of revelation and scholasticism.

For the Austrians, democracy is to blame for capitalism going into crisis. Democracy breeds special claims by people who are not really concerned with making the choices that regulate the economy. The people without a big stake—the masses—thus destabilise the system. Democracy introduces things like central banks to monkey with the market. For the Austrians, this is where everything goes wrong. This is the fall; the expulsion from paradise.

Such institutions will lower the market rate of interest below the 'natural' (ordained?) rate. Run by public servants who have to consider public opinion rather than entrepreneurs, such institutions will pander to a naive popular desire to keep market interest rates low in the cause of high economic growth. Governments will tend to expand the money supply and cause market interest rates to fall below the 'natural' rate of interest. The choices made by big capitalists will thus be imperfect because their ability to make reliable subjective judgements will be stymied. Market signals will be scrambled. The gnomic commandments of the almighty become inaudible. Overinvestment is the inevitable consequence of inflation (as the Austrians define it). It leads to what Austrians coyly call 'lopsided production.'

This is the so-called Austrian 'Business Cycle.' Boiled right down: crashes and recessions happen because central banks set interest rates too low. Easy credit results, which screws up market signals. Loaners go crazy. Bubbles inflate and burst. Such lopsided production can only be remedied via letting interest rates rise to their 'natural' rate. In other words, the Austrian prescription is: let the crisis rip. It will be harsher but quicker. The only cure for god's wrath is to wait for the plague to exhaust itself.

Most mainstream bourgeois economists are scathing about all this. And yes, it's rubbish. But there are some grains of truth to it, as Marxism is uniquely placed to notice. It is true that crashes come from *within* capitalism; that they are not the result of sunspots (metaphorical or literal). It is true enough that low interest rates take the brakes off loaning and borrowing, and thus artificially stimulate bubbles. But this is a by-product of the crisis, not the cause of it.

For Marx 'capital destruction', which happens in the wake of every crash for obvious reasons, is also the main mechanism whereby capitalism recovers. There is literal destruction of capital, but more fundamentally there is destruction of capital values. Crudely, the big fish gobble up the little at bargain basement prices. This is how capitalism restores the rate of profit sufficiently to climb out of the depression into which the falling rate of profit has flung it. If this process is retarded—i.e. via easy credit—then the recovery is also retarded.

But it doesn't follow, therefore, that Marxists support the Austrian position. Marx did not think the horrors of an unmitigated process of capital destruction were a just punishment that had to be endured so the system could right itself. He saw such processes as evidence that capitalism needed to be replaced, not that it needed to be left unencumbered. For Marx, capitalism, wracked by such endogenous crises, had become a fetter on the further

development of human potential. To the Austrians, most humans—and their pesky desire not to starve to death in a crash—are a fetter on the further development of capitalism.

More fundamentally, while the Austrians nearly have a point about credit and recovery, they are completely wrong about where crashes and depressions come from in the first place. The most basic and howling error in the Austrian idea of the business cycle is the fact that capitalist crisis was a thing before central banks. I mean… game over, right? But, as is always the case with dogmatists, there are 'explanations.' The Austrians enjoy an advantage here with their eccentric and idiosyncratic understanding of terms like 'inflation', and their assertion of the existence of things like the 'natural' rate of interest, etc.

Notice that all this has been derived from axioms about central banks, about what they think interest is, and about how humans negotiate desire and time. The original axioms are based on taking a subjective view of certain people in a particular social and historical moment and generalising to infinity. The willingness to countenance the punishing cruelty of the unmitigated crisis is fundamental. Undoubtedly the callousness is formally derived from the axioms, but it is also a function of the privilege of those making the arguments. After all, it was the ignorant public—through their democratic institutions and big governments—that caused the crisis. Let them suffer the consequences. And if democracy threatens to get in the way of such measures? Well, that only goes to show what a bad idea it always was.

Although some marginalists have drawn social-democratic, liberal, or even left-wing conclusions from their theory, Austrian economic theory as we know it is inherently anti-democratic. Opposition to democracy *is* entailed by the Austrian view of how capitalism works. Democracy is the rule of the ignorant and selfish public, and the state is their tyrannical arm. Moronic majoritarianism wields unjustifiable power over the propertied and the entrepreneurs who are, for Hayek for instance, almost promethean artists in their special sensitivity and understanding. Socialism is thus the worst kind of tyranny. It is, as the Austrians understand it (and we have to admit that the history of 'socialism' has given some warrant for this misapprehension), the ultimate expression of statism. But they don't hate statism because statism is undemocratic, but rather the exact opposite. They hate it because—as they see it—statism *is* democratic. They are, ironically, the unknowing cousins-beneath-the-skin of the 'socialists' they hate, and whose systems they declare unworkable: the Stalinists and reformists. Like them, they see socialism as state-control of capitalism. it's just that the Austrians characterise this as the

unjust and damaging domination of the propertied by the propertyless. From this basis it is, of course, very easy to get to 'white men are oppressed by political correctness'—and, these days, they do.

But any economic theory which makes any concessions to the idea of state control over the economy—including monetarism!—is considered tyranny by the Austrians, at least theoretically. Indeed, to the Austrians, any such concession effectively *is* socialism. And it comes of a visceral horror of democracy.

This is, as we'll see, the product of a market fetishism so profound that it borders on, and perhaps even stems from, the religious. But then isn't religion, amongst other things, a set of metaphysical claims based on axiomatic presuppositions? There is at least one prominent modern Austrian, Peter Boettke, who, is also a Christian presuppositionalist.

As intimated, crisis, in this Austrian theology, is divine punishment. As in other such theologies, it can be avoided if sin is purged. In the Austrian view, this means scrapping central banks, scrapping money controls, scrapping any government economic planning. The means to achieve this must be the scrapping of democracy.

For Marx, however, capitalist crisis is inevitable. The core of Marx's argument is his contention that there is an inbuilt tendency in capitalism for the rate of profit to fall over time, owing to the inescapable need for capitalists to make production more efficient by investing in technological innovation. The details are complex and the theory has been, to say the least, controversial. But the reader needn't accept it. The point is that it is the antithesis of the Austrian theory in many ways, despite the fact that the Austrian theory is at least an admission of the fact that crises happen. Which, ironically, makes it an improvement on most mainstream economics, which tends to assume crises won't happen and can't happen right up until they do.

A good dualism tends to be rooted in a similarity of some kind, and there is definitely a sense in which, though opposites, the Austrian and Marxist theories have more in common than either do with the mainstream view of crisis. At least neither refuse to stare into the eyes of the rampaging basilisk at the heart of capitalism. It's just that, seeing the silver eyes, the Austrians don't run, they smile.

Of course, there is a sense in which Marxists do the same. In both cases, the crisis is a confirmation of beliefs. In both cases, the believer sees the crisis as—in some way—a sign of the oncoming future. Endogenously unstable, irreformable, and ultimately replaceable; or perfect but for the artificial imperfections, forced on it by parasitic and unnecessary meddling. The

Austrians are like the communists of the 20th century who, aware that Stalinist Russia had become a monstrous perversion, were still defending it as some form of 'degenerated' workers' state, essentially saying that it might be a monster, but it's *our* monster. That's what the Austrians and libertarians *et al* say about capitalism. Compromised, ruined, monkeyed with by statists and democrats and demagogues and special claims, etc, it's a garden of earthly delights overrun with weeds. Weeds, of course, can be killed.

There is a wider point with special relevance to today. It doesn't really matter if the Austrians have a point. It matters that they *look* like they do. In striking aesthetically at the heart of Marx—and thus of the most powerful socialist critique of capitalism—they strike powerfully at the heart of the idea of changing the world, at a time when the world desperately needs to be changed. And they have an audience. And a strategy. And these things have had, and are having, an effect.

Transformations and Calculations

But we need to look into the past again and return to first principles. Our methodology is rooted in haunted traces and buried things, so let's actually look at what happens when the vanguards of the Austrian School face off against the red menace.

In a polemic published not long after the posthumous publication of *Capital* vol. III, Böhm-Bawerk claimed that volumes I and III of *Capital* contradict each other when it comes to the matter of how values are transformed into prices. This claim was very influential among mainstream economists for a long time because, as Andrew Kliman says in his book *Reclaiming Marx's Capital*, "it reflects their view that only price and profit, not value and surplus-value, matter in the real world." Kliman goes on to note, in his polite way, that "[i]t has also been very influential among non-economists, probably because it is simpler than the subsequent critiques." And yes, Böhm-Bawerk often comes up when people begin talking about what is arguably the longest running and most damaging controversy in Marxist economics, the issue known as 'the Transformation Problem.'

There is no doubt that, in the loose sense, Böhm-Bawerk founded this controversy. However, the contradiction he supposedly detects in Marx is actually not the one that formed the basis of the long-running debate. That is really based on a different objection, stemming from the work of a Russian economist called Bortkiewicz. The point here is that it is misleading to credit Böhm-Bawerk—and thus the Austrian School—with the damage that was actually done to the intellectual reputation of Marxist economics by others.

Without wishing to sound paranoid, it seems possible that, with Böhm-Bawerk having identified Marx's account of the transformation of values into prices as a supposed weak spot, bourgeois ideology was simply unwilling to abandon its attack on that supposed weak spot, and simply changed weapons without missing a beat. Perhaps it just couldn't let go of the idea that someone had found a thread that, if pulled, would cause the revolutionary core of Marx's entire critique to unravel. Sadly, for them, Marx had actually used the thread to find his way through the labyrinth, and pulling on it only lets the monster back out.

The actual 'transformation problem' has been conclusively refuted by Andrew Kliman in *Reclaiming Marx's Capital*. Moreover, Kliman makes short work of Böhm-Bawerk's actual claim, showing it to be based merely on his dodgy parsing of Marx's text. This was pointed out by the Marxist economist Rudolf Hilferding (an Austrian in the sense of nationality only) in his devastating response, published hot on the heels of Böhm-Bawerk's polemic. As for his claim that Marx's account is tautological (again, very much *not* the basis of the transformation debate), Kliman explains that this is based entirely on unfounded assumptions of Böhm-Bawerk's as to the nature of money that are not shared by Marx.

Böhm-Bawerk's wider critique of Marx involves many accusations that his system relies upon ignoring reality, upon unfounded assumptions, upon abstract reasoning, etc, but provides very little actual demonstration of such things. He is guilty of many of the crimes he ascribes to Marx. As Hilferding says, Böhm-Bawerk is essentially criticising Marx for having a bizarrely wrongheaded version of marginalism, and for basing his case on nothing more than coherent arguments from first principles, but of then being incoherent. He proceeds from this assumption, consciously or not, because he cannot see any other perspective.

We won't prove or disprove Marx's value theory here. The point is that Böhm-Bawerk's objections come nowhere close to doing so either. But then, I suspect that for many of those who cite Böhm-Bawerk the point is not whether Austrian arguments actually do or don't demolish Marx, but rather that they sound good. Superficially plausible arguments that appeal to intuition and prejudice are the stock-in-trade of the online Austrian. Flourishes of impressive names like "Böhm-Bawerk" and "von Mises", etc, provide a plausible-looking facsimile of demolition. And indeed, most people who chuck Böhm-Bawerk's name around online fail to understand him and offer vulgarised caricatures of his arguments. But that's poetic justice.

When it comes to Mises, Böhm-Bawerk's pupil, there really is very little to talk about. He carries a glamour… but he is, essentially, a charlatan. A quack. Were it not for the fact that a subsequent line of thinkers in a distinct and cultish tradition have preserved and puffed his reputation, he would've been justly relegated to little more than a footnote in the history of ideas, the builder of yet another crackpot early-20th century philosophical 'system.'

Mises wrote a popular book about how socialism as impossible and unworkable, as Hayek would later also do. The timing of publication was undoubtedly tied to the fact that, in 1920, it looked to most observers as if the infant Soviet Union was about to expire a mere three years or so after its birth. Mises was positioning himself to be able to dance on the grave of the world's first workers' state.

Mises asserts that public ownership, because it abolishes the capital goods market, means that there can be no determination of prices for capital goods, and therefore no way to determine the relative values of primary resources, and therefore no way to allocate them efficiently and rationally. This claim is patently outrageous coming from people who are putting it forth as a way of championing capitalism, a system that has brought us to the point where the richest eight men on the planet own as much as the poorest 50% of the entire human race, and which is literally pushing the planet to the point where it will very soon be unable to support human life. But let's take it seriously for a moment.

In simple terms, the argument—which, as will be clear, is derived directly from Austrian first principles—runs thus: a society must be able to allocate its resources efficiently by making economic calculations. To do this you have to know what the 'primary factors'—the big, important resources that form the basis of all production, such as land, steel, and capital itself—are worth, and thus the best use to make of them. You derive this knowledge from prices assigned by the market. But if such primary factors are communally owned, they are not subject to a market, which means they do not end up with prices which accurately reflect their values, thus making it impossible to calculate how to allocate them efficiently.

Mises' observations—revived and popularized by Hayek in the 1930s—sparked what became known as the 'Calculation Debate', a series of exchanges among economists between the two world wars. The debate is often misremembered as a debate between Austrians and Marxists. However, only one of the major participants on the socialist side was a Marxist. The others all wanted to show that a case could be made for socialism within the assumptions of neoclassical economics. Consequently, the defence of planned

economies involved taking lots of the assumptions of bourgeois economics at face value, and thus advocating (some say inventing) a form of 'market socialism.' Indeed, the most significant rebuttal of Mises came from the Polish economist and diplomat Oskar Lange, who rejected the Marxian theory of value in favour of the neoclassical conception of prices.

Lange's model involved a free market in labour and consumer goods (so workers still sell their labour power in return for a wage, and then spend their wages as they see fit), combined with a 'Central Planning Board' for allocation of primary factors. The Board would set prices (presumably based on prices inherited from capitalism) and, through a process of trial and error, adjust those prices according to ensuing surpluses and shortfalls. Such experiments would only have to be run a few times before mathematical models could be invented and used. Lange claimed that such a system would be at least as efficient—if not more—than free markets. (Lange, notably, was an early advocate for using computers, making his ideas a prototype of the "friendly AI runs the world" scenario.) Lange et al were widely held to have decisively settled the matter. And, if you're prepared to conceive of socialism in non-Marxist terms as a system of state-managed capitalism, and to consider these issues theoretically outside actual historical experience, they pretty much did.

Hayek retreated to a fallback position where he claimed that, while rational planning was theoretically possible, it was also unworkable because of the sheer number and complexity of the calculations the planners would have to make. Markets comprise millions and millions of prices, and every price is interdependent with every other, meaning every change entails millions of marginal adjustments. In a market, these adjustments happen automatically. A planned economy would set itself the task of doing all that 'by hand' as it were.

Hayek put his faith in entrepreneurs, whom he believes have a "tacit knowledge" of the market that cannot be expressed. One of the weird ironies here is that Hayek implicitly admits that the Stalinist central planners were kin to the 'entrepreneurs' of free market societies, and yet while he argues for the entrepreneurs getting to make the decisions because of their 'tacit knowledge', he argues against the possibility of the planners doing essentially the same thing. Underlying this is the implicit inability to imagine an economic system without some elite in a position of decision-making authority. But planning need not be centralised and undemocratic. It might instead involve the mass of the population. Indeed, contrary to the assumptions of almost everyone—anti-Marxists and Marx's supposed supporters alike—Marx makes it clear that the active, collective, and democratic participation of the working class in

planning is not only morally desirable but practically essential to socialism—far more so than any legal change concerning who owns what. At the very least, the knowledge—tacit or otherwise—of the working class at large can be brought into the planning process. Indeed, this was Trotsky's solution when he originally made the argument against Stalinism that Hayek is ripping off here. Deliciously, Hayek ends up—at least in some ways—agreeing with Marx over the 'Marxists.'

In the end, Trotsky was right, and so, by extension, were Marx and Hayek (which is an enjoyably outrageous sentence to type): 'really existing' planning *was* centralised and undemocratic. Without the 'tacit knowledge' of workers in localities, planning broke down, replaced by top-down command which increasingly failed to keep in touch with reality. This is not the place to go into the nature and failings of the Stalinist system, but suffice to say: there is a lot of historical context left out of the above, and the more fundamental failures of such 'state capitalist' bureaucratic capitalist systems are—in one of the great ironies of history—powerful empirical confirmation of Marx's theories of capitalism.

Summing up the debate, however, we should stress the following:

1. Mises' categorical rejection of socialism (as he understood it) as impossible was plausibly rebutted—on its own theoretical terms—by Lange;

2. Hayek's retreating points about complexity hit the mark (to an extent) when applied to centralised command economies, but these are far from the only kinds advocated by socialists, especially now;

3. The restriction of 'tacit knowledge' to entrepreneurs or planners (depending on which side you're on) reveals that nobody in the debate was talking about socialism as proletarian democracy.

The Keynesian mainstream of the time was happy to adopt Hayek's anti-planning arguments as an ideological defence against socialism, but rejected the rest of his worldview as surely as they did socialism. The enemies—Austrians and socialists alike—were left on the outside. But then the outside turned out to be the right place for Hayek to launch his offensive to rescue the system from itself. Hayek, thus ideologically armed with a critique of planning and statism, gathered his forces. The mainstream of the time had blithely fostered the seeds of its own destruction.

The Road From Mount Pèlerin

Hayek famously wrote that he was not a conservative. Certainly he did not want to conserve the world as he found it: dominated by Keynesian state-intervention, and influenced by a confident and unionised working class.

Famously, Mrs Thatcher threw down a copy of Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* during a heated cabinet meeting, while insisting "this is what we believe." Thatcher, of course, remains an object of outright veneration for the Conservative party, which has, over the last few years, implemented neoliberal dogma so effectively that their austerity measures have, according to one study, killed 120,000 people in the UK.

In one form or another, neoliberal dogma has dominated Western capitalism for decades now. It still does, whatever one might hear. A few massive bailouts do not a return to Keynesianism make. Indeed, the whole idea is dependent upon the assumption that neoliberalism *didn't* involve funnelling money to unaccountable private interests, which is laughable. 'Taxation is theft' has a grain of truth to it, like so much seductive bullshit.

The rhetoric about the failure of neoliberalism is, of course, a way to blame a particular set of policies rather than the capitalist system itself. But there can be little doubt that the particular set of policies in question were deeply implicated in the specific form and magnitude of the 2007-08 crash and subsequent non-recovery. And while some economies enjoyed superficial prosperity by several markers before neoliberalism 'failed', neoliberalism exacerbated the inequalities of capitalism. Production for the market being the problem, as Marx pointed out, of course the handing of unprecedented power to the market made everything worse.

While undoubtedly all this is the result of deep historical forces, none of it 'just happened.' It may have been done by people acting at the head of vast social forces, but it was still *done*. Individual human beings acted. And as the inspiration for those actions Hayek—courteous, civilised, and a genuinely great intellect—has more blood on his hands personally than any of the other Austrians.

In 1947, not long after Hayek had published his own popular anti-socialist book *The Road to Serfdom,* he took the lead in founding the neoliberal project in the form of the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), which took its name from the Swiss village where it held its first meeting. This event brought together many currents and individuals within classical liberalism, including Hayek and Mises, and many others, such as Milton Friedman, the prophet of Chicago School monetarism.

The aim of the society was clear: to defend freedom and civilisation by defending the principles upon which they were obviously (to these people) based: private property and free market capitalism. The group felt that these things were under increasing assault, and that the progressive ideas which had become associated with liberalism were inessential, undesirable, and needed to

be purged. They advocated a return to the *laissez-faire* and free-trade liberal economic policies of the past, and the purging of all the extraneous nonsense about social reform and equality.

It's important to remember that this was pure ideological reaction. Social-democratic governments had, to one extent or another, both before the war and after, set about trying to change things—i.e. the 'New Deal' in America and the post-war British Labour government—at least partly in response to popular pressure. And the 'alternative system', state ownership in the 'communist' world, glowered over Western capital's shoulder, making them scared of their own working classes with their irredeemable tendencies to 'collectivism', to paraphrase Milton Friedman.

For decades after the Second World War, the West enjoyed an unprecedentedly long boom under the constant stimulus of Cold War arms spending, during which capitalism could afford to buy off workers' resentments with social spending. But the long boom started decaying, arguably in the 60s, and definitely from the 70s. Before this, key national liberation struggles against Western colonialism had been unprecedentedly successful. Millions of people across the Western world rose in struggles over civil rights, workers' rights, women's' rights, queer rights, and against war. By the late 70s, the capitalist world had been plunged back into recession. And the ideas of Hayek and the MPS were waiting to be picked up.

Again, this didn't just happen. It happened because one of the avowed aims of the MPS was to disseminate their ideas in elite circles until they changed the political common sense of the people at the top. And it was specifically Hayek who devised the slow drip-drip dissemination strategy, winning over others at the conference.

Chilling Effects

A somewhat more direct route to neoliberalism was followed in Chile by the 1973 CIA-sponsored military coup led by General Pinochet. The Chilean junta wasn't organized by the MPS or Hayek, but Hayek was undoubtedly a political and intellectual inspiration to it, and his colleague Friedman—along with his 'Chicago Boys'—helped design it a new economy. Hayek himself became a confirmed friend of the regime. It's worth remembering that, like the rest of the neoliberal project, the Pinochet coup was explicitly counter-revolutionary. It unseated Salvador Allende, the democratically-elected leader of a left-wing popular front.

In 1981, the MPS held its annual conference in Viña del Mar, Chile, the seaside resort where Pinochet had planned his coup. They hobnobbed with the top brass and the big bankers of Pinochet's dictatorship, along with the regime's fellow-traveller intellectuals. They drank wine and enjoyed the opera. Like starry-eyed communists of the 1930s who'd just visited the Soviet Union and taken care to look at it only through the slim gaps between their fingers, they came away convinced that they'd glimpsed utopia.

Of course, it was a utopia in which thousands of political prisoners had been, and continued to be, 'disappeared' into an institutionalised system of state-run torture, rape, and mass murder. Not that the MPS people denied the tyranny. On the contrary, they acknowledged and praised it. Hayek later wrote to the London *Times* that he'd been unable to find anyone in Chile who didn't feel more free than they had under Allende. This is unsurprising, given the circles he mixed in. And, y'know, the fact that Pinochet had thousands of dissidents killed and tens of thousands tortured.

Hayek wrote to Thatcher in ecstasy, recommending that she institute Chile-style policies in the UK. She responded that she'd love to, but they had this pesky thing called 'democracy' in Britain which would get in the way… especially, one suspects, since she was already sinking in the polls and 'shock therapy' (to use Naomi Klein's phrase) wouldn't help. In the end she found the solution to her electoral woes in some contrived blood-letting abroad, against —ironically enough—a South American country. She used jingoism to get herself re-elected by climbing a pile of corpses, and then used her mandate to declare war on "the enemy within." This referred specifically to the miners, but more generally to anyone—especially anyone working class and organised—standing in the way of her unleashing as much of Hayek's Chilean prescription upon the country as possible.

(It's worth noting in passing that, despite still being held up by ideologues as an example of free market economics rescuing an economy, Pinochet's Hayek-and-Friedman-inspired policies actually drove Chile into an economic crash. This was only alleviated by a change of policy direction—including re-nationalising loads of the industries Allende had nationalised and which Pinochet had re-privatised after taking power. It was only after this that Chile started to become the success story that the free-marketeers still take the credit for.)

But evidence isn't a consideration, as we've established. Instead, the reasoning is from first principles, i.e. democracy leads to totalitarianism. Hayek gets this from Mises and reiterates it throughout his work. He sees central planning as the result of democracy, central planning as socialism, and

socialism as inherently totalitarian. So he supports the authoritarian crackdown. As Hayek said in a 1981 interview with Renee Sallas of Chile's *El Mercurio* newspaper: "I prefer a liberal dictator to democratic government lacking in liberalism." The Austrians have a history with this sort of thing. Mises served as an advisor to 'Austrofascist' dictator of Austria, Engelbert Dollfuss, who saw Nazism and Communism as the same, and Austrofascism as an emergency measure.

Hayek's position is the Dollfussian logic of Mises working itself out. In his apologia for Pinochet's tyranny, Hayek is clear that it's a stopgap, and all the fault of the left. The class nature of the ideology is clear when you remember that Hayek lambasted left-wingers who were prepared to countenance the idea of 'temporary' suspensions of democracy as 'stages' towards socialism.

Neoliberal praxis is thus based on Hayek's extreme right-wing critique of democracy, itself based on that of Nazi jurist and legal theorist Carl Schmitt, whom Hayek praised. The logically consequent idea that emergency dictatorship may be necessary to preserve liberal society from democracy is in neoliberalism's source code. Neoliberalism, contrary to myth, is an authoritarian ideology, committed to defending property and wealth by violence both physical and structural. This isn't 'because' of Hayek in any crude way—unlike him, we must eschew the 'great man' theory of history—but he was a vector.

In short, the Austrian School's historic role as an ideological centre of gravity to the right of the bourgeois mainstream enabled it to both influence the rise of neoliberalism and then become a stern ideological critic of actual neoliberal praxis from the right. Just as the original Austrian School was marginalism-but-more-so, its later form continues to serve as fanatical boosters of capitalism while also lurking at the extreme rightward fringe of capitalist society's intellectual, ideological, and political range of what is acceptably avowable. Its position explains its role—similar to other iterations of extreme reactionary thinking—as a rightward drag factor. Capitalist society allows such rightward drags to pull it their way at times of crisis, 'selecting' ideological positions based on their comparative material and ideological strength in the context. If you like, it makes a subjective judgement of reaction's marginal utility. The selection of marginalism as a new mainstream is itself an example of this. Similarly, 20th century capitalism, wracked by various crises, selected first statist government (in various forms) followed by, after more crises, neoliberalism. The Austrian School played its role beautifully.

The Austrians' continuing position at the far rightward end makes them obvious neighbors to fascism—which is the furthest ideological extreme of

bourgeois ideology, and another resource for capitalism in time of crisis. This is why, in the age of neoliberalism, Austrian dogma metastasized into something extremely dangerous and reactionary: paleolibertarianism.

And we've arrived back at Rothbard.

Come, Asteroid Come

If Hayek represents the wing of the Austrian School with the most direct links to actual material power, Rothbard is the most important link in any chain drawn between the Austrian School and the fringe right. And his creation of paleolibertarianism was a key step in this. Framed as an "Outreach to the Rednecks" strategy, paleolibertarianism aimed to promote the relatively unpopular extreme free-market dogmas of libertarianism by joining them tactically to America's powerful trends of post-1960s reaction. In practice, this meant cooing appreciatively about David Duke and striking an alliance with Pat Buchanan, who you may remember as the guy Trump confidently predicted he could beat to the 2000 Reform Party nomination because of his excessive fondness of Hitler. The formal alliance fractured not long after Rothbard's death when Buchanan fell out with Lew Rockwell, and the remaining network of influence was pushed to the margins a few years later by the rise of neoconservatism under Bush, but it continued to seethe gamely on the Internet, where it proved popular among a certain strand of geek. There it interbred with fascism and white supremacism, becoming one of the strands that eventually coalesced into the alt-right.

We can thus trace a line directly backwards from Charlottesville to the Austrian School. This is not to say that the two are the same, that the alt-right 'is' Austrian, or that the alt-right wouldn't exist in some form if Menger had never been born. That's the kind of crude, genetic fallacy reductionism one finds in Rothbard's account of the history of economics, wherein he finds 'precursors' to the Austrian School all over the place, based on his assumption that the Austrian School is the summation of the history of economic ideas. The chain of events I've outlined is not the whole or sole explanation for the existence of today's alt-right. But it is undoubtedly an important and neglected part of the story.

Paleolibertarianism, however, came quite late in Rothbard's career; the main thing he's known for is as the founder of anarcho-capitalism. We need only look at the chaos that neoliberalism has unleashed upon the world, to know that going even further down that route is not just morally wrong but also pragmatically crazy… assuming that the continued existence of the human species factors into our conception of what is generally desirable. Saying that

without state interference the market would be free is like saying that without the soil, the vegetables you eat wouldn't need washing. It is an entirely incoherent to reject state power from a capitalist perspective. You can't seriously entertain anarcho-capitalist positions unless you're… well, insane.

But frankly, libertarianism and its various flavours *is* insane. It should be noted that anarcho-capitalists and other libertarians have actually been found debating on the internet whether or not it would be immoral to tax people to raise funds to prevent the Earth being destroyed by collision with a giant asteroid. And we're not just talking about Reddit shruggalos. Sasha Volohk—Associate Professor at Emory Law School and contributor to the *Washington Post*, wrote: "I think there's a good case to be made that taxing people to protect the Earth from an asteroid... is an illegitimate function of government from a moral perspective."

And from the perspective of Rothbard and his followers, who shrugged off Mises' utilitarianism, he's right. Instead of utilitarianism, Rothbard bases his thinking on an ethical principle, a variety of 'natural law' or 'natural rights', inherited from Locke. Locke's theory of property basically held that it was permissible to appropriate unused land if you used it. This is, ironically, an obvious modern precursor to the LTV, which Rothbard professes to absolutely despise, to the point of writing a scurrilous attack on Adam Smith to accuse him of plagiarism.

Locke did not, of course, think that what native peoples did with their land constituted 'use.' Nor did he mean that the people who actually worked the land owned it; he meant the *employers* of those people. Once again, the premises are carefully chosen to lead to the correct conclusion. And in this case, the conclusion was the moral justification for black chattel slavery and the appropriation of land from natives by white imperialists. The dirty truth about Locke is, in essence, the dirty truth about classical liberalism: it arose from capitalism, and its project was to help create and legitimise the new forms of class and racial hierarchies generated by capitalism. It existed as a theoretical and ideological justification for European capitalist imperialism, which many libertarians now profess to oppose.

There's another large and obvious problem Rothbard should have with Locke's idea of natural property rights: the fact that the whole concept of 'natural law' or 'natural right' is essentially derived from God's law. But, as indicated, religious concepts run through Austrian thought. This is clear when Rothbard tries to claim that the medieval 'late scholastics' of Salamanca were proto-Austrians because they too believed in natural law. In fact, all he

manages to (accidentally) prove is that his own ideology is still steeped in religious casuistry.

For all the bullshit, Rothbard and his theories proved a seductive mix. With its built-in aura of both the intellectually-elite and the non-mainstream, its pretensions towards being anti-establishment, and its claims to brusque and impatient rationality mixed with a moral defence of liberty and property, Rothbardian reaction has an image that works. The hard-nosed defence of free markets has the right dose of machismo while also retaining a glamour of bespectacled, book-wormish intellectualism. But there are no sums to do, of course. Praxeology sees to that, along with serving the instinct to make reductionist statements about people based on the idea that they all have free will, a concept easily adapted to excuse whatever injustice needs to be excused. It's free will, and also it's always been like that; a classic reactionary contradiction that could be embraced unabashedly. The racism inherent here can be adapted silently, or not so silently, as strategy demands.

For a long time, the nearest thing to an organisational node for all this was, of course, the GOP, which is why so much effort was put into pushing that party in the right/Right direction.

And on that subject…

The Three Rs

In his essay 'On Social Sadism', China Miéville recounts an occasion when

> [a]t a debate between Republican candidates in September 2011, Wolf Blitzer, the chair, mooted the case of a hypothetical thirty-year-old uninsured man who becomes sick. '[C]ongressman,' Blitzer asks Ron Paul, 'are you saying that society should just let him die?'
>
> 'Yeah!' comes a shout from the audience. A smattering of applause. The shout is repeated, and again, and the applause grows.

Paul—a paleolibertarian—later clarified his position on Twitter saying that "[t]he individual, private charity, families, and faith based orgs should take care of people, not the government."

Before his retirement, Paul used to have portraits of Mises, Hayek, and Rothbard on his office wall. Paul is a Senior Fellow of the Mises Institute, which was co-founded by Rothbard and financially backed by Hayek. He's probably the most high-profile and widely respected of all the libertarians in American politics. He's a vocal supporter of Austrian economics and has advocated Austrian ideas in several books. He's famously committed to the policy of scrapping the Federal Reserve, in line with the premises of the Austrian Business Cycle theory. He's also a vocal supporter of returning to the gold standard, a longstanding Austrian and libertarian notion.

Paul has run for the Republican Presidential nomination several times, and always attracted millions of dollars of donations, and a fanatical—often young—fanbase. He pitched himself to the young white men of the internet as a rebel right-winger, using libertarian ideas. His was to be a 'Ron Paul Revolution', storming the barricades for a paleolibertarian manifesto. The ideas were a concoction of small-government, 'taxation is theft', free-market rhetoric with hardline conservative stances such as opposition to abortion. The signature of paleolibertarianism is this very fusion.

No report on Paul would be complete without mentioning certain 'newsletters.' In the words of *Mother Jones*:

> Published as far back as the late 1970s, under various mastheads bearing Paul's name (*Ron Paul Political Report*, *Ron Paul's Freedom Report*, the *Ron Paul Survival Report*), the newsletters are, at times, virulently racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and conspiratorial.

Amongst other things, the newsletters contain warnings of a coming race war, whinges about black crime and welfare queens, attacks on Nelson Mandela, claims that gays are spreading AIDS deliberately, praise of white supremacist guru Jared Taylor, etc. According to *The New Republic*, Paul made almost $1M from publishing these newsletters in just one year. To be fair, as almost everyone now acknowledges, Paul almost certainly didn't write the newsletters himself, and now publicly rejects the sentiments in them. But he hasn't given any of the money back.

The prime suspect in the "who actually wrote the newsletters" whodunit seems to be Lew Rockwell. Rockwell is the chairman and co-founder (with Rothbard) of the aforementioned Mises Institute. The Mises Institute is a major hub of right-wing libertarian organising and propaganda, and is currently the main agency propagating Austrian dogma. The Southern Policy Law Centre balks at calling the Mises Institute a hate group, but it comes close, listing the myriad hate groups with which it has connections.

Rockwell is also the man behind the modestly named website LewRockwell.org, which pumps out not only Austrian, right-libertarian and paleolibertarian material, but also repeatedly posts rather brazenly racist and white supremacist filth. Rockwell also co-edited the 'Rothbard-Rockwell Report' (or the *Triple R*, as it was affectionately known to its basket of paleodeplorable readers) with (no prizes for guessing) Rothbard.

Rothbard was open about calling for a culture war to alter American politics. He was quite prepared to make common cause with people like David Duke, as he makes clear in his essay 'Right-Wing Populism', written for the *Triple-R* in 1992 and now available on LewRockwell.org—and also, like so

many of the pieces which appeared in those two venues, now collated in a book called *The Irrepressible Rothbard*. (Pardon me while I vomit.)

Duke, also praised in the Paul/Rockwell newsletters, is the former high-ranking Klansman who was recently seen 'strengthening' the ranks of the alt-right when they coagulated at Charlottesville for a tiki torch rally and a spot of vehicular homicide. (It will be recalled that even Trump's "many sides" comment was too mean for Duke to stomach.) In the early 90s, he managed to insinuate himself into Republican politics in Louisiana and picked up a hefty share of the white vote down there. Rothbard was not scandalised by this, but rather by the fact that people were upset by it. As he explains it, there is

> nothing in Duke's current program or campaign that could not also be embraced by paleoconservatives or paleo-libertarians; lower taxes, dismantling the bureaucracy, slashing the welfare system, attacking affirmative action and racial set-asides, calling for equal rights for all Americans, including whites: what's wrong with any of that?

The leaders of Rothbard's revolution would be the libertarians and the minarchists. The troops would be the masses, spurred to fight the elites. And the spurring would take the form of appeals to racism. That's the paleo strategy in a nutshell, and it was openly expressed by the nutcases who invented it.

The result of victory would be the end of the oppression of whites. Whites are the real oppressed group these days, you see, because modern elites insist upon giving unfair advantages to non-whites, who just don't deserve to do as well because genes or something. (Rothbard loved *The Bell Curve*, naturally.)

As is by now drearily predictable, Rothbard's anti-statism goes out of the window when he pontificates about the need to crack down on crime. Give the cops free reign. "Get Rid of the Bums" he announces as an imperative. "Where will they go? Who cares?" Elsewhere he seems happy to countenance police using torture… because it's all in the good cause of, um, anti-statism. Various social issues, particularly the ones that are controversial because the Right want to use them to bash women, will be devolved to the local level, where federal courts cannot intervene.

Then there's the Jewish Question. Let's glide over some outrageously anti-Semitic statements made by Rothbard (who was himself Jewish), and his defence of anti-Semites and holocaust-deniers, and go straight for his description of himself as a "a pro-Christian Jew who thinks that everything good in Western Civilization is traceable to Christianity."

But it was race where Rothbard really got himself going. Rothbard hated the 1960s civil rights movement, of course. He despised Martin Luther King. (He had more time for Malcolm X because, as he explained in the manner of an indulgent plantation owner, Malcolm acted white.) He called the 1964 Civil

Rights Act "monstrous" and a "horrendous invasion of the property rights of the employer" in the course of a genuinely astonishing essay about the Clarence Thomas / Anita Hill case. Rothbard seems to have found the case fascinating, presumably because he couldn't work out who he hated more: the (of course) tokenistic black candidate for the Supreme Court, the various cowardly politicians engaged in Thomas' confirmation hearing, women in general, Anita Hill in particular, or the "Monstrous Brigade" of feminists. In the course of the essay he mansplains his way through every familiar iteration of anti-feminism: victim-blaming, disbelief, denial, paranoia, self-pity, persecution complex, misogyny… all spiced with racism, naturally.

(What is it with these fuckers and women called 'Anita'? I guess it's a case of 'first as tragedy, then as farce.')

This is the man described posthumously by his acolyte Hans-Hermann Hoppe as one of the world's "intellectual giants" whose work put him on a par with Aristotle, Locke, and Kant. Here he is, vomiting forth sub-teenage MRA bile like he's on 4Chan. And you can trace the entire thing back to a line at the start of his essay, before it escalates into a revealingly-hysterical tirade:

> In short, "civil rights" are encouraged to ride roughshod over property rights. Whatever this is, it is leagues away from the rights set forth by John Locke and by the Founding Fathers.

We needn't search for smoking guns proving his influence on today's world because we needn't postulate an easy cause-and-effect scenario. Rothbard, via his open project of agitation to push American conservatives in his direction, and to promote the idea of radicalising "the masses" to take up their ideas, has helped prepare the way for the general climate. In the irrepressible Rothbard, always salivating and snickering at the thought of repressing those who deserve it, we can see Miéville's 'surplus sadism' made quivering jowly flesh.

Transcending Libertarianism

In an article at BleedingHeartLibertarians.com, Steve Horwitz, Austrian economist, and professor at St. Lawrence University, writes:

> The paleo-libertarian seed that Ron Paul, Murray Rothbard, and Lew Rockwell planted in the 1990s has come to bear some really ugly fruit in the last couple of years as elements of the alt-right have made appearances in various libertarian organizations and venues. Back in February, alt-right hero Richard Spencer stirred up a fuss at the International Students for Liberty Conference in DC after being invited to hang out by a group of students calling themselves the "Hoppe Caucus." Hans-Hermann Hoppe, long associated with the Ludwig von Mises Institute as well as a panoply of racists and anti-Semites, is perhaps the most popular gateway drug for the alt-right incursion into libertarianism.

Horwitz identifies as a 'left- libertarian', though this doesn't preclude him from involvement with America's extensive, millionaire-funded, far-Right, academic lobbying machine. But he's uncomfortable with the way some libertarians are

actively courting the alt-right, and recounts with distaste the example of Jeff Deist.

Deist is the current president of the Mises Institute. Not long before the Unite the Right rally at Charlottesville, he delivered a speech to the 2017 Mises University entitled 'For a New Libertarian.' Deist ended his speech with the following words:

> In other words, blood and soil and God and nation still matter to people. Libertarians ignore this at the risk of irrelevance.

Blood and soil. In the summer of 2017.

Horwitz is disapproving. Most of the rest of us, I'd hope, feel our blood run cold.

In a piece published at Mises.org just *after* Charlottesville, Deist strikes a glumly patronising tone. His response amounts to a pompous reiteration of Trump's belligerent blithering about polygons. But Deist must've known what he was doing. And if he didn't know, he had no excuse for not knowing. His speech amounts to the Mises Institute courting a nascent fascist movement.

Richard Spencer, Mike Enoch, and Christopher Cantwell are all former libertarians and paleolibertarians who are now prominent on the alt-right. In a profile of Enoch which appeared in the *New Yorker*, Andrew Marantz writes:

> He began reading books by Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and Ludwig von Mises, the grandfather of libertarianism. For a few years, he was an enthusiastic and doctrinaire libertarian. He started a blog called the Emptiness, where he wrote posts such as "Socialism Is Selfish" and "Taxation Is Theft."
>
> …
>
> Within a few years, he started to wonder whether libertarianism was too tepid. After all, its premises pointed toward a starker conclusion: if the state was nothing but a hindrance to freedom, why not abolish the state altogether, leaving only the unfettered market? From there, he went even further. What if you couldn't account for people's behavior without considering their cultural background, and even their genetic makeup? "Slapped in the face by the reality of human bio-diversity," he later wrote, "I had to come to grips with the fact that libertarianism isn't going to work for everyone, and the people that it isn't going to work for are going to ruin it for everyone else." Human biodiversity: the idea that people are different, that they differ in predictable ways, and that some people—not just individuals but groups of people—might be inherently superior to others.
>
> He thought he had carefully examined each of his beliefs, reducing them to their most fundamental axioms. But here was an axiom so fundamental that he hadn't even articulated it to himself, much less subjected it to logical scrutiny. Now that he thought about it, he wasn't sure why he should assume that all people were equal. Maybe they weren't. If this was a textbook definition of racism, then so be it—maybe racism was true.

Christopher Cantwell became notorious after his appearance in the Vice documentary about the Unite the Right rally at Charlottesville, and subsequently became known as the 'Crying Nazi' owing to his reaction to imminent arrest for pepper-spraying anti-fascists. During his libertarian phase, Cantwell was enthusiastic about the 'Free State Project', a planned political

migration of at least 20,000 libertarians to a state with a low population in order to create a utopia of small government, low taxes, etc. LGTOW, you could call it. Volunteers were required to sign a contract to move to New Hampshire as soon as the minimum number of recruits had been achieved. The irony of loads of libertarian right-wingers *migrating*, under *contract*, to forge their own *state*, doesn't seem to have occurred to them. Nor to Ron Paul, or the Austrian economist Walter Block, or Peter Schiff, or LewRockwell.org and the Mises Institute… all of whom praised the scheme.

In a blog post published just after Charlottesville, Cantwell wrote:

> I instantly became fascinated with the history, and economics that libertarianism taught. I later became a big fan of Murray Rothbard, and Ayn Rand. You might be aware, these people are Jewish. Shocking to some then, that I am today a rather vocal anti-Semite.

Cantwell is also a fervent admirer of the anti-democracy ideas of Hans Hermann-Hoppe. Like Hoppe, Cantwell is fond of jokes about free helicopter rides for leftists. Hayek would probably grimace at the vulgarity.

Cantwell got to 'race realism' via libertarianism. Via transcending it, or radicalising it, he says. This is a common theme among these people. They talk about transcending libertarianism, or growing out of it, of radicalising it, or finding alternatives to it. They are fascists now, but they got there via Rothbard, Rockwell, Hoppe, Paul… all directly ideologically descended from Mises. The disproportionate number of former-libertarians in American fascism is revealing because conservatives are far more numerous in America than libertarians, which suggests that libertarianism is statistically over-represented.

As noted, Moldbug is another admirer. "Mises is a titan; Rothbard is a giant" he says. Though irritable with Hoppe over his failure to commit to royalism, Moldbug cites him as a transformative influence.

The presence of libertarianism, avowed at various levels of understanding, at every point on the spectrum from the Mises Institute all the way over to the alt-right on the streets of Charlottesville, is well-illustrated on YouTube—and this alone is sufficient evidence of its influence, its role as a vector.

The 'Cultural Marxism' conspiracy theory is enormously popular on this spectrum. Like anarcho-capitalism, it would be superfluous to debunk since it is ridiculous on its face. Nevertheless, it's worth saying that, insofar as it attributes the origins of the conspiracy to the Frankfurt School, it isn't just wrong—it's *exactly* wrong. The accusation is that Cultural Marxists are deliberately putting anti-family, anti-male, anti-straight, anti-white, anti-capitalist messages (the only grain of truth here is the assumption that, in some sense, all these antis are compatible) into popular culture in order to

erode the dominant—and of course proper—institutions and hierarchies of Western culture in order to impose communism. The trouble is that the Frankfurt School's dominant current believed that revolutionary transformation of Western capitalism was now all but impossible, that the masses were no longer capable of becoming revolutionary subjects, and that this was attributable—to a huge extent—to the inherently paralysing and soporific effects of mass popular culture. Their critique of Hollywood, etc, has some points to make, but it ultimately collapses into a crude and deterministic elitism which sees the only possible ideological challenge to the suffocating web of 'totally administered' modern capitalism being high modernist art. And even there, Marxists cannot shape such challenges, they can only elucidate them through criticism. Far from doing this secretly or covertly, it must be done publicly. At every point, the Frankfurt School's view is pretty much the exact opposite of that imputed to it by the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theorists. At no point in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* do Adorno and Horkheimer advocate bringing about communism in America via an all-female remake of *Ghostbusters*.

This is a perfect cameo illustration of the affinities I've been trying to demonstrate. The Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory now espoused across the alt-right is a reiteration of what the (actual) Nazis called *kulturbolschewismus*, an idea central to Nazi dogma, about degenerate art and culture being manufactured by Jewish communists to undermine the unity of the German people. The resurrection and repackaging of this idea across a movement soaked in libertarianism is not surprising, because antagonism to socialism goes right back to the dawn of libertarianism, to the Austrian School's foundational and self-chosen role as the intellectual foe of Marx.

The same tracks also lead to Peter Thiel, and to Vox Day, who's written Austrian-style tracts of his own. Indeed, like several other people, he seems to have had a go at appointing himself the alt-right's philosopher-in-chief. He defines the alt-right on his blog *Vox Popoli* in a series of theses (sounds like 'theses' anyway) in which he goes out of his way to say that various groups—neoconservatives, for instance—are *not* alt-right before saying that the alt-right is an *alternative* to libertarianism. Well, an alternative is not a negation. Alternatives are implied to be more-or-less equivalent. Later in the same article he unironically employs the fourteen words because of course he fucking does.

The only main substantive ideological difference between libertarians and the alt-right is one that Vox accidentally highlights: the alt-right tend to oppose absolute free trade because that means open borders. So, the alt-right

essentially *is* libertarianism, but modulated to fascist principles. This is not to say that the actual dogma of the Austrian School, or even of the MPS, is directly determining the content of alt-right websites and chatrooms today. The point is the movement, both in the sense of a nebulous chain of actors motivated by the same resentments and justified by the same dogmas, and of the movement of the political centre of gravity. This movement is possibly more dangerous than the fascists themselves. As we've seen more blood is on Hayek's hands via his involvement with neoliberalism, which came into the mainstream via institutional means. Rothbard, who has so far only radicalised the fringe, isn't even close. But, as also noted, the mainstream, the establishment, is open to the tug from the extreme.

Outriders in Chatrooms

The mention of Vox Day is usually where some idiot fan of his pops up in the comments section to say that you can trace direct roads from Marx to the Gulag, and it means as much. The difference is straightforward: Stalin did a very bad job of implementing Marx's ideas, whereas DWP claimants killing themselves is more or less exactly what Hayek wanted. But the larger point is that this is a book and doesn't have a comments section. All the same, it's worth shifting the magnification level on our emerging system to look at why the Austrian School takes to comment sections like Marxism to obscurantist self-published tomes, especially since this is superficially a very different approach to the disciplined ideological infiltration of the Mont Pèlerin crowd.

The rise of the online media that Austrianoidal, LibertAryan, and AnCapistani trolls thrive upon is directly linked not only to the decline of newspaper readerships, but also to widespread public disinterest in what newspapers are selling: more or less blatant propaganda. (This observation, of course, could come straight out of Moldbug, but then nobody deserves any prizes for noticing the obvious.) People might not necessarily formulate their objections to the content of newspapers that way, but they're nevertheless absenting themselves from daily exposure to one of the main means by which the ruling class produce ideology and public consent. This is at least as big a concern to the people running the media as the need to claw back profits. Or perhaps more accurately, they simply don't see much distinction between these two goals.

One of the methods which has evolved—largely in a self-organising way to start with, though connivance and subsidy increasingly play a role—is the evolution of the far-Right internet subculture. The reason it is usable is because it can flourish partly in and partly out of sight. Reactionary creepy-

crawlies can swarm in semi-private chat rooms and forums, feeding incestuously on the extreme Right ideas expressed on open 'news' sites. Such sites can regularly peddle the most venomously extreme ideas in a manner which that looks—literally *looks*, as in 'appears to the eye'—to be 'respectable' and 'normal' and 'mainstream.' Or, depending on their chosen identity, they can seem iconoclastic and rebellious. Or intellectual. One of the great advantages of sites like Mises.com and LewRockwell.org is that they can straddle this divide. Indeed, the alt-right obsession with "virtue signalling" is a characteristic bit of projection in this regard, mistaking the empty platitudes by which they dress their propaganda as normative liberalism for the whole of leftist thought.

One of the many ironies here is that this methodology works because the sites, generally operating entirely online for free and thus not needing a distributive network and a pricing system, are largely freed from the strictures of the market. The far-Right, certainly when being open about what it is, has nowhere near enough traction amongst the masses of ordinary people to sell newspapers any more profitably than the dying giants. The rednecks you want to reach out to won't buy the *Journal of Austrian Studies*, but they'll follow links to Mises.org and Breitbart. But there's another level to the appeal: even the most popular of fascist newspapers in the UK, the *Daily Mail*, faces declining circulation and an aging readership that's only going to accelerate the problem. How do you disseminate far-right propaganda to younger age groups, especially the very young?

Once again, individual human beings acted. In cadres, of course. Far-right groups actively targeted online communities dominated by young white men in order to spread their ideology. The most famous of these is Stormfront's infiltration of *4chan*, where they recognized that the community's embrace of "ironic" racism provided them an opportunity for ideological recruitment. Volumes have been written on the interconnection between forums devoted to pick-up artists, which claim that the secrets to successfully losing your virginity can be yours for whatever the price of their self-published ebook is (the secrets generally being "rape people"), and so-called men's rights activists. And, most famously, there's the blatant pile of lies that was Gamergate, a flagrant effort to recruit gamers into fascism. In all of these cases, the strategy is to play on insecurities of young men in an age where there are mounting ideological challenges out there—especially on the Internet—to their untroubled social privilege. Coupled with the twin legacies of decades of neoliberalism—increasing ideological and political disorientation, and a future far less secure than that which faced their parents and grandparents at their

age—such challenges can terrify the semi-privileged layer of young, white, middle class men, who enjoy all those privileges without also enjoying actual material security.

And so the Right-wing internet—internally extreme and externally respectable, open to triangulation through a combination of slick public faces and anonymous private spaces, focused on the anxieties of younger people (especially male), a mutually-reinforcing echo-chamber of voices insulated from facts by the very decline of journalism that has allowed it to thrive—has evolved to fill an increasingly-vacant niche in the hegemonic ideological system of Western capitalism. In many ways, the classic role of what Owen Jones called 'the Outriders'—the populist propagandists of neoliberal extremism—has been taken over by this new seething online undergrowth of ultra-conservative vermin. They've fostered a tortured relationship with neoliberalism, and the neoliberal establishment, which allows them to condemn both with apparent sincerity while bolstering them with reactionary distractions.

As noted, this is a very different approach to the problem than the Mont Pèlerin Society's small army of intellectuals and wonks. Sure, they're still basically all nerds, but there's a difference in audience. The first wave of neoliberal Outriders aimed for posts in academia and elite journalism, crafting a judicious combination of extreme rhetoric, analysis, pressure, and intellectual bafflegab in order to influence the actual halls of power. The basic story they spun was the same as the modern alt-right approach—a tale of left-wing domination of society destroying their freedoms. But with the decline of the establishment media the modern Outriders have found a new audience, at once grubbier and more ambitious: to bring the ideology to the populist masses no longer well-served by CNN or the *Daily Mail*.

Being, fundamentally, a degraded version of the media, the alt-right's presentation of this ideological narrative is unsurprisingly theatrical. This extends not only to the "meme magic" approaches that resurrected an ancient Egyptian god of primordial darkness as a cartoon frog that causes people to get punched on national television (which can be understood as a sort of cargo cult re-enactment of the neo-Situationist techniques behind leftist groups like the Occupy movement), but to their stylized and ritualized "debate" with online liberals and feminists. These responses are a quasi-coherent miasma of assumptions, factoids, lazy misapprehensions of their chosen victim's views, recited talking points and, in most cases, outright lying and distortion. (The dead giveaway is a near complete lack of substantial quotations and close-reading of their supposed opponents.) But it's arranged

in a superficial parody of an actual scholarly, intellectual tradition based on an unslakable thirst for intellectual credentials giving rise to a whole ecosystem of Right-wing 'atheists' and 'rationalists', who lump feminism in with creationism as an absurd delusion, and claim to debunk feminism and other such ideas they hate using 'logic' and 'reason' and 'facts', etc. It's a vast system run by imposters without a syndrome, fuelled by Dunning-Kruger. Paleo thinking, enabled by praxeo method.

To be fair to the Austrian School, the role it plays in this scenario is more-or-less as a brand with which some of today's reactionaries identify (in the true style of the neoliberal theory of brands) rather than as an actual corpus of ideas with which to engage. But we've already seen that the ideas—intrinsically undemocratic—are why that works.

Such flat assertions of the proven invalidity of socialist ideas are hardly a million miles from the mainstream. But the added allure of the Austrian School as a rationale for such dismissals is that it provides all the things desired by the keyboard warriors of capitalism. Elite intellectual confirmation and support. The very phrase "the Austrian School" provides some of this; the syllables drip prestige. It can be imagined as part of a Manichean cosmology, diametrically opposed to the evil Frankfurt School (font of the evil Cultural Marxism conspiracy, as we know). The insistence upon using the 'vons' is still doing some work of aristocratic glamour (and how telling that so many of them *were* vons in the first place). And yet, as intimated, the Austrians, being heterodox economists and outside the mainstream, also retain —in the reactionary imagination—that tinge of the disreputable, the rebellious, the anti-establishment.

This is a common reactionary fetish, actually. Many Thatcherites were attracted to the idea of themselves as rebels, as fanatics. The neocons (hated by libertarians, as it happens) liked and encouraged the (ridiculous) notion that they had some similarity to Trotsky. Steve Bannon declared himself a Leninist. Ron Paul declared himself the leader of a revolution. The right always apes the left. The attraction works upon those young fogeys who, while not wanting to challenge any of the fundamental problems with the world, nevertheless fancy themselves rebels and iconoclasts. They stress their differences with mainstream neoclassical economics, knowing that such pro-capitalist orthodoxy dominates academia and not wanting to be part of the mainstream, but also not wanting to depart too far from the pro-capitalist consensus. This works according to a dynamic similar to the one which insists that 'social justice' dominates the academic establishment while also being a melange of fringe lunacies. It is the very domination of most economics departments of

academia, and the think tanks, and the policy units, by neoclassical economics that forces the reactionaries to focus on the supposed domination of the humanities by left-wing views, or 'Marxism' as they call all of it. The ambiguous position of the Austrian School—or rather the *idea* of the Austrian School that is projected onto the brand name—appeals to this desire to be both within and without the establishment at once.

Paradoxically, some of this is done by the (comparative) few economics departments and think tanks and policy units now dominated by Austrians and libertarians, funded by wealthy reactionaries like the Koch brothers. (Old libertarians, those two… though, ironically, they used to be so far on the 'left' of libertarianism that their baleful example was part of what spurred Rothbard and Rockwell to create the paleo strategy).

The long and short of this is that, ironically, the substance of the Austrian School's opposition to Marxism has progressively faded over the century and a half since Menger (along with, to be fair, all other substance of the Austrian School) even as its explicitness increased. It is tempting to assume that this means the substance was always irrelevant—that anti-Marxism was always a symbolic function/visceral reaction. But ideology is always aesthetic, and aesthetics always visceral; the guts squirm in response to terror. There is no contradiction between rational, class-based loathing of Marx, and irrational hysteria as a result. Plenty of reactionaries have been very sane about their loathing. You can do that when your mechanism for arriving at theories of material life is to openly just make shit up.

What's going on here is still counter-revolution. Paleolibertarianism is a reiteration of the same spirit that animated the history we've glanced at. It is fighting against a world in which, under the surface, the mole of history is burrowing away from capitalism, or at least away from an untroubled acceptance of everything it entails. But here, on the collapsing fringe of the anthropocene, the argument has degraded to sub-280 character quips about Cultural Marxism from people with Pepe avatars. But the lineage remains visible. It was Rothbard who originated the argument that, essentially, Adorno invented feminism on behalf of the international Jewish conspiracy. But the point isn't the praxeological substance; it's that even here, as late capitalism rapidly runs out of afterparty, the rotting fruits of Menger's labor can't extricate themselves from their familiar opponent. Spectres gonna haunt, motherfucker.

But why? Why does this opposition recur no matter where the Austrian School tries to run? Why, for all that the Austrian School wants to be a bunch of edgy rebels, does it find itself endlessly drawn back into picking fights with

an ideology that it constantly claims is comprehensively discredited? Yes, obviously, part of it is that Marx is self-evidently correct, the Austrians know it, or at least have no excuse for not knowing it, and the cognitive dissonance obsesses them.

But the Austrians are wrong about lots of things—indeed, nearly everything—and it's not as though their most degenerate fringes go around obsessively picking fights with statisticians. (I mean, unless they're women.) Nor, as we've seen, do they have any issues with fascists and authoritarians, despite their ostensible devotion to freedom. They made that particular cog-diss constitutive of their cognition long ago. So why can't they assimilate Marxism in the same way?

Again, it's obviously partly because the class struggle continues, and Marx is still the guy who *could* best arm the other side. But Marxism clearly represents something more fundamental; a more primal challenge, existing on a deeper level than what any amount of economic debate can hope to address. The Austrians recoil from Marxism as from a hot stove—reflexively but purposefully.

Praxeology is, essentially, a mystical idea… or rather a magical one, in that it is about *creating* reality through talking about it. Marxism is about this too, in its way, but there is a huge difference. Praxeology is a story told to the ruling class to lull it to sleep; Marxism tells stories to try to get the working class to wake up. Does that sound like its own flavour of elitism? It can be. But there is yet another fundamental difference. Marxism's stories are, ultimately, derived from the experiences and activity of the people it addresses. Marx developed his mature view of socialism because of the Paris Commune.

More to the point, though, this weird rivalry exists entirely on the Austrian side. Marxists, by and large, do not find Mises or Hayek to be their bogeymen of choice. Go to any Austrian site and you'll find loads of 'debunkings' of Marx. As ever, you wonder why something so self-evidently wrong needs to be constantly disproved. The Austrians are like those YouTube gamers who have to pwn Anita Sarkeesian six or seven times a day or they start to get anxious. But, tellingly, go to any Marxist site and you'll be lucky to find passing mentions of the Austrians. So, while the obsession surely reveals some essential truth about Marxism, it will only ever be understood by looking at the Austrian School.

Why do these particular individual human beings act this way in particular? Could it be because, on some level, they know that the system which allows them to celebrate their rugged individualism is the same system that currently circumscribes life for the vast majority of the individual human beings on the

planet, including—in a more comfortable way—them? They may not be compelled in the same way as a worker in an Economic Processing Zone in Asia, but they're still compelled. Capitalism compels everyone. Even the people it privileges are compelled to compete against each other, and to thus repeatedly tip the world they own into chaos… a truth so terrible that almost nobody on the planet wants to know it. And it was their bogeyman who best described their predicament:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

Ironically, it is the dead tradition founded by the men who wrote that which —in a gothic style that would've pleased them—keeps rising from the grave to weigh like a nightmare on the brain of Rothbard… and we all know what zombies do to your brain when they catch you.

Are they hunted by the horror of the idea that they are a by-product? A by-product, moreover, that disproves itself? After all, the history and trajectory of Rothbard's tradition can be seen as proof of historical materialism, in that they clearly demonstrate the class struggle, the rising of ideology from the economic base, ideas then becoming social forces, and the material dialectics needed to make all that happen. If the Austrian School did everything it has done just because individual human beings acted, then a remarkable degree of coincidence must've been operating. Their insistence upon arguing exactly that is probably quite telling.

Moreover, the process just sketched all took place in the shadow of Marx, because while marginalism probably would've happened anyway, the Austrian School as we know it never would've happened without Marxism. Marx is the awful gothic horror interred beneath Rothbard's shining praxeological edifice. But this doesn't actually tell us very much that isn't obvious. Perhaps slightly more interestingly, it turns out that, in the tradition of arch-enemies, Marx is also Rothbard's creator.

How dreadfully embarrassing. Except that such determinism really won't do for any Marxism which takes itself seriously. In any case, Marx revelled in paradox and his entire system is based on the idea that everything that moves does so because of internal contradictions. To accept the idea that Rothbard might be one of our Frankenstein's Monsters is to just deal with a little more vestigial Hegel in our system.

But the Austrians are quite unprepared, psychologically, to handle the idea that Marx might be their real creator. Determinists, they might be seduced by

the logic of the idea, yet it clashes with their iteration of determinism. Marx, as ever, is fucking things up by just being there as a huge fact of their history.

Demiurge!

Once again, we return to first principles: apparently, individual human beings act. As we noted, this is structured to be an utterly anodyne statement of conventional, classical liberalism. And yet we've seen very clearly that Rothbard is driving towards a very unconventional liberalism that is nowhere near as anodyne as the fundamental axiom wants to look. The axiom, in other words, is a basilisk of liberalism—a horror arising from some excessively fidelitous execution of liberal thought. But Rothbard is trying to play it cool—to make the argument without its horror becoming too apparent. So unsurprisingly, he sets about papering over the gap, trying to frame his argument so that the point of departure never gets noticed. Which, of course, means facing it up front, albeit obliquely.

Right after he makes his weird split whereby consciously chosen action is governed by separately defined values, he makes his first overt negation, entertaining the idea that "a person's choice of values or goals is wise or proper or that he has chosen the technologically correct method of reaching them" in order to emphatically reject it. Not only does this make values even more bewildering (now they're chosen too?) it's a very strange to bring up in the first place. Surely nobody's initial reaction to the statement "individual human beings act" is "so therefore I am a fearsome demiurge capable of accomplishing anything I wish." Except, of course, somebody's is: Murray Rothbard's.

Having introduced this idiosyncratic theory, Rothbard proceeds to embrace its obverse, that "the individual actor adopts goals and believes, whether erroneously or correctly, that he can arrive at them by the employment of certain means." But, of course, he doesn't. Most of us at best hope we can, but recognize that even if we employ the correct means we are sufficiently buffeted by massive and uncontrollable external forces—not least economic ones—that there is no certainty or even likelihood that we will achieve our goals. The obvious thing to point out is that Rothbard is implicitly limiting the category of humanity to those of sufficient class and power to not be constantly and acutely aware of the desperate and contingent nature of actual life. Luckily, his intellectual tradition warrants this, but there's a limit to how often it can be applied. The less obvious, but in some ways more profound thing is that having introduced an utterly bizarre viewpoint for the sole

purpose of knocking it down, Rothbard doubles down and asserts that thinking this way represents the typical mind.

In its own tortured way, this is really nothing but a hysterical turning-up-to-eleven of the subjectivism built into marginalism, with its atomised but well-informed consumers who go around with preference scales in their pockets (literal or metaphorical), against which they measure every choice they make. The fact that most people don't do this can always be subsumed into a kind of elitist contempt. Reactionary politics once again takes advantage of having a wide batrachian mouth, both sides of which may be used for talking.

Rothbard's position at this point is highly unstable. He's acutely anxious about the fundamental disconnect between actions and goals, but has committed himself to not fully seeing that disconnect—to believing that action and goal can become a unified concept if one is sufficiently good at avoiding error and selecting the right means. He needs to find something that can fit into that gap and allow him to maintain his needed ambiguity. To this end, he abruptly brings time into proceedings, noting that goals are displaced into the future, because "if all of a person's desires could be instantaneously realized, there would be no reason for him to act at all." He concludes that the future must be uncertain with similar reasoning, with an added shell game where he goes from "man does not have omniscient knowledge of the future" to "we live in a world of uncertain, or not fully certain future" without any intermediate steps. From this, he concludes that "man chooses to employ means according to a technological plan in the present because he expects to arrive at his goals at some future time."

Clearly, despite living in an economic system that generates depression, Rothbard has never suffered from it or known anyone who has, as the assertion that man *expects* to arrive at his goals would otherwise be unjustifiable. But what's really important is the way in which Rothbard selects a metaphysically necessary condition of human existence to displace all his anxiety about failure onto. The reason actions don't lead inevitably to goals isn't because there are complex material structures of oppression that heavily shape people's lives, but because we exist in linear time. Not only does Rothbard not connect time to what dominates it for most people in capitalist society—work—but hilariously, he doesn't even bother connecting time to its ultimate horror and constraint, death. And no wonder—nothing good would come of realizing action's connection to the ephemeral nature of being, not least the fact that it blows a hole in the idea that action is necessitated by the non-instantaneous nature of goals as opposed to simply because we find ourselves restless during our long and inevitable slide from cradle to grave.

Time instead remains purely abstract—a formal separation between action and goal that exists with no consequences beyond itself. The abstraction of time, enforced on humanity by the rule of capitalist production, is of course one of Marx's major complaints. For the Austrians it is the basis of the rewards reaped by promethean entrepreneurs for their virtuous deferrals.

From here (and note that Rothbard has packed the strangeness thus far into a mere three paragraphs from "individual human beings act"), Rothbard asserts that the fundamental axiom also "necessarily implies that the means employed are scarce in relation to the desired ends, for if all means were not scarce but superabundant, the ends would already have been obtained, and there would be no need for action." This is the same foolish argument that he uses to prove that we can't see the future, and in neither case does it make a damn bit of sense. The former is in some ways the more bewildering of the two, partially because it's applying this ridiculous reasoning to a seemingly self-evident point, but also because omniscient knowledge of the future would not prevent action by making it unnecessary so much as it would completely refute the idea of free will in the first place. The latter, meanwhile, reduces the lunacy to its pure form in the entirely unjustifiable assumption that there's some alternative to action, as opposed to it being a necessary consequence of the interplay of consciousness and linear time.

Once again, the monster Marx is waiting at the end of the paragraph to remind Rothbard that purposeful action—i.e. labour—is the ultimate expression of humanity's 'species-being', but is enslaved in class society; that the scarcity of class society is artificial; and that unalienated labour should be the greatest expression of freedom. To quote the monster directly: "Milton produced *Paradise Lost* in the way that a silkworm produces silk, as the expression of *his own* nature." Marx would like all labour to be like that, and sees no fundamental reason why it shouldn't. For Marx, that would be humanity returning to nature. In nature, time would just be the playground.

Indeed, Rothbard comes close to nervously realizing all this, observing that "even with the absurdly likely advent of Eden (or what a few years ago was considered in some quarters to be an imminent 'postscarcity' world), in which all desires could be fulfilled instantaneously, there would still be at least one scarce means: the individual's time, each unit of which if allocated to one purpose is necessarily not allocated to some other goal." This is a remarkable sleight of hand in which the obvious point about the interplay of time and conscious action is almost made, but linked instead to the idea of scarcity, with time being downgraded from necessary precondition for human experience to

a mere commodity to be allocated, with the switch obscured by a hilariously undercooked musing on the idea of a post-scarcity economy.

It's at this point that Rothbard makes his inevitable declaration that, because all of these conclusions are necessarily true implications of a self-evidently true axiom, they "cannot be 'tested' by historical or statistical means" and that furthermore "there is no need to test them since their truth has already been established." Which, obviously, no it hasn't because Rothbard's argument is a shambolic mess. But more important is simply the fact that this is the moment in his argument where Rothbard finds it necessarily to hurriedly close the door to all objections that are not simply word games built around the ever-shifting vagueness that is "individual human beings act." This rhetorical turn is one that could have gone anywhere—his paragraph transition is an overtly jarring "such are some of the immediate implications of the axiom of action." And yet it's here, immediately after his shell game with time and scarcity, that he suddenly decides that the goal most urgently requiring his conscious action is informing his reader that arguments based on mere empiricism are invalid. Clearly there's something to unpick here.

Were the praxeological argument a sincere account of Rothbard or Mises's reasoning, this would be the point where all of the far-right lunacy becomes inevitable. But no; this is the point of the exercise. It is fair to characterize the three paragraphs of "immediate implications" of his axiom as a frantic drive to enshrine scarcity as a fundamental principle. This in and of itself is revealing: the first priority of praxeology is in effect to enshrine inequality and deprivation as basic facts of the universe of comparable ontological standing to time itself. Even if he'd done this well, it would very clearly be a dick move. But what's really notable here is the odd tension between where the argument starts and ends. Yes, Rothbard's entire goal here is establishing that scarcity cannot be overcome, but recall that he gets there from an assertion of strong individual determinism whereby we firmly believe that, if we can only manage to pick the correct course of action, we can achieve whatever goals we have. Again, this isn't much more than a freshly tortured version of the old lies of opportunity and meritocracy, which can only stand up when supported by the lie of innate hierarchies. This is the real monster at the end of Rothbard: the same monster he started with.

It's the one that highlights the fact that Rothbard's combination is, obviously, acutely socially Darwinist: inequality happens, but only because some people make the correct choices while other people fuck up. And this is, ultimately, where Rothbard's musings about uncertainty end up—one can consult Mises's *Human Action*, which Rothbard is summarizing here, to

discover that he describes the future as "hidden" and discusses the problem of prediction as one about "the incompleteness of our knowledge." He speaks of the "ability to understand the future," and even proclaims that "praxeological knowledge makes it possible to predict with apodictic certainty the outcome of various modes of action." This clearly isn't just "people believe they're the masters of their destiny," but a belief that the future is, if not entirely shapeable by human action, still something that a skilled operator can work with in total confidence.

This isn't quite the recreation of Rothbard's weird demiurge idea. The argument doesn't necessarily require that we accept that people born into poverty have the ability to achieve their goals; the possibility remains that apodictic knowledge of their outcomes will simply result in the realization that no matter what they do, they're basically fucked. It's pretty clear that the Austrian School doesn't even remotely care about this fact, but it doesn't inherently contradict anything they say. But that is, in the end, the point, and one I've made before: they don't care. That's clear, in a sense, all the way back in the basic axiom, with its active foregrounding of the heroic individual acting upon the world, as opposed to the state of affairs that most actual people experience, which is mostly being buffeted around by various external forces, whether they be governments, history, or the class system. Indeed, "individual human beings are acted upon" would be every bit as justifiable an axiom as "individual human beings act," if not moreso.

I would suggest that, whatever motivations might have originally existed for Menger's swerve away from mathematics, this is for Rothbard (and very likely for Mises as well), the real point of praxeology's anti-empiricism: it saves them the burden of having to pay attention to this fact. Empiricism requires looking at the world and all the things that happen within it, and they'd much rather stay in their cozy little realm of naval-gazing theory. Safely outside the circumstances not of their own choosing.

But Marx continues to haunt. It's not really the class struggle, or even that Marx is their creator, which really imbues him with such power—as foundational as these things are. To work out what it is, we need to look not at what the Austrians realise about him, but rather what they take care to not realise. As ever, you know what people are most afraid of when you identify what they make sure they don't know.

Freedom Fromm

Earlier in this volume, I talked about the Turing Test as a test of empathy, in which a machine is said to be able to think if it can imagine the perspective

of a human woman and imitate her use of language as well as a human man can. I suggested at the time that there is some sense to applying this to concepts other than individual artificial intelligences and people with a suggestion that perhaps white culture no longer passes. Let's take this seriously and apply the concept directly to society, which can after all be seen as machine. (Consider Moldbug's explicit equation of designing political ideologies with tech startups, for instance.) The metaphor has an inexescapable tang of the sinister to it these days. But still, it's not a bad metaphor for something that was created by humans and is - at least notionally - supposed to serve them. If nothing else, that the machine is a product of capitalist modernity and that, like the machine, capitalism actually dominates us rather than serving us, makes the metaphor downright apt for capitalism.

Surely, at least by a liberal precept we shall tactically accept, a society is at its optimum when it is in the greatest possible synchronization with human nature. A society will best serve us and make us happiest when it functions according to our real needs. And so the Turing Test, or at least its broader conclusions about empathy, seems entirely applicable to the problem. Our society-machine needs to understand us.

Now, we need some caveats here. Of course, there can never be such a thing as a human nature separate from society. We are the zoon politikon, as Aristotle knew. There can never be such a thing as human needs which are not influenced by society - because "individual human beings act" is, as we know, a grossly ahistorical and contextless snapshot. And there is no sense in which a human need is 'unreal' just because it is the product of a given society. All that is granted. Indeed, we don't need to be afraid of granting these things. They are all observations that Marxism keeps in mind far more steadfastly than is managed by other ways of looking at the world.

But still, I think we can safely assert that some societies are better at catering for the people in them (and who produce them) than others, and that this can be measured (at least to a degree), and that therefore there must be some yardstick by which we can do the measuring, and that this yardstick is probably something to do with human needs that stand outside historically and geographically specific contexts. For Marx, this was to do with our nature as socially labouring animals, as producers with foresight and the ability to act upon it to change the world to make it nearer to our liking. (Contrary to myth, Marx believed in human nature… though, to paraphrase Norman Geras via Eagleton, he might not have known that he did.)

Looking at the various societies humans have created after the rise of class, we might be tempted to say that this nature is as much curse as blessing. And

Marx would've agreed. But he also thought that there was no inherent reason why our nature as social producers couldn't be harnessed to our collective betterment, given the right historical developments. He thought that this would heal a rift or arrhythmia between humanity and nature which was caused by the rise of class society. (This, by the way, is the basis of what is now the only conceivable method of averting the anthropocene extinction.) For Marx, this would not mean eschewing the machine. Indeed, it would only be possible on the basis of the very development of the productive forces that entails the machine.

So let's - without swerving way out of our current scope - contemplate the idea of a benevolent social machine. A postcapitalist society as a machine built using the productive basis of capitalism, but harnessing it to a better end. Such a machine would have to be based on healing the rift, aligning the arrhythmia, bringing humanity's essential nature as social producer back into synchrony with the imperatives of the social system. It would, in short, be a machine that had empathy for the people within it. And so in the face of it, we would lose sight of the fact that our interactions with society were interactions with a machine instead of with other humans.

Such a society would itself destroy the fetishistic and alienating metaphor of the machine, as applied to itself. Under such circumstances, it would cease (instantly or gradually is a different question) to be possible to conceptualize society as a machine; as a powerful mechanism, created by humans yet outside of human control and exercising power over humans. The machine would be indistinguishable from the human because its empathy for our fundamental condition would cause it to cease to be a machine. It would become us, in every sense.

This is, obviously, a far more radical notion of socialism than anything the Austrians understand or imagine. But for all their misunderstanding of it, they still have a sort of vestigial half-notion of the destruction it would bring, and they fear it accordingly. To them, however, socialism is merely a system of state ownership and management. As in the USSR, production in such systems is still of commodities, and by wage labour. So, the argument stays forever on the safe ground of whether managers can efficiently run an economy. This actually isn't—for all the ink and blood spilled over it—a particularly hard question for anyone who's ever had a boss to answer.

The Austrians are not, of course, alone in being unable to conceptualise the stateless and democratic version of socialism. But they have done as much, if not more, than anyone else to propagate this very conceptual impossibility—despite being right up close to Marxism, almost since day one. Again, here they

resemble Stalinists. They have been hugging Marxism on the brink of the Reichenbach Falls for a century and a half, staring into its eyes, *but have never really seen it*. They have spent a long time grappling frantically and hatefully with that which they do not, and will not, look at. The essence of neurosis is denial. But, of course, in order to choose to be incapable of conceptualising something, you have to already have some idea of it. The Austrians are marginalism's version of the Weird.

We have already noted the Austrians' essentially metaphysical view of the market. To them, it is the battleground in which we work out our desires and methods against ourselves, against unforgiving nature, and against others. It is where morality comes from, as well as freedom. It is literally what gives life meaning. In this they resemble nothing so much as the radical and authoritarian Protestants who arose with, and championed, the rise of bourgeois relations in Europe during the Reformation—especially the Calvinists. With their 'Doctrine of the Elect', which looks like an early-statement of the ideological implications of Hayek's 'spontaneous order', the Calvinists posit that our worth in the eyes of God is preordained, but that we only discover it by striving. Thus the ideology perfectly expressed the interests and worldview of a new bourgeois class by reconciling meritocracy (you end up where you deserve to be) and predestination (you end up in the only place you ever could). It makes sense that it should still be with us, espoused by the same class in power.

In the Doctrine of the Elect, hierarchy is based on inborn and unchangeable inequalities, but at the same time, if you're doing well it's down to your own superior achievements. God is the mechanism by which the selection is made; a kind of social market is the mechanism that reveals and rewards it. Thus, as well providing content to Hayek's 'spontaneous order', it is the theological basis of Rothbard's paleolibertarianism. It is the essence of how Rothbard reconciles his social-darwinistic schema with the religiose tendencies of his tradition.

So, relishing the perverse impudence and offensiveness (to some) of doing so, let's—for a moment—seek to understand something of the psychology of the Austrian School using the ideas of the Frankfurt School, specifically the ideas of the Marxist-Freudian Erich Fromm. (It's another relishable irony that Freud was an Austrian who initiated a radically subjective system.)

In *Fear of Freedom*, Fromm elaborates a dialectical account of human consciousness in late modernity through the prism of a dichotomous conception of the concept of freedom. For Fromm, freedom can be divided into 'freedom from' and 'freedom to' (This is akin to Isaiah Berlin's notions of

negative and positive liberty, but Fromm got there seventeen years earlier.) The concept of freedom for most liberals, especially libertarians, and perhaps especially Austrians (since Hayek was the leading theorist of this), is essentially negative. Political freedom means little more than formal freedom from coercion. But Fromm says that 'freedom from' (FF), while desirable and often fought for, carries dangers within it. It is not a guarantee of happiness. Indeed, it can generate unhappiness, and then destruction. Essentially, Fromm's idea boils down to saying that the absence of political or social coercion can be deeply unsatisfying because FF, being essentially negative, leaves us without 'freedom to' (FT). Indeed, 'individual human beings act' is, as we've seen, designed to efface just this.

Even if all coercion is removed, humanity in capitalism remains trapped in the corrosively hopeless condition of commodification. Fromm sees humans, semi-freed in the capitalist epoch, increasingly afflicted with the malaise of FF, as fleeing to authoritarianism, destructiveness, and conformity. He sees Nazism as, essentially, a response to this predicament. The application of this insight to much of what we've talked about in this essay is obvious.

Fromm brings up the rise of Protestant theology during the Reformation —particularly, as it happens, the ideas of Luther and Calvin—as examples of the development of ideas which express and respond to increases in FF. These striving bourgeois ideologies were authoritarian partly because they expressed the terror of new freedoms being brought to humanity by the very new system they expressed. The Marxian "movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority" is thus an unholy prospect. Such freedom would mean the destruction of value, and thus, to some, of all moral choice. Socialism as Marx conceived it would be the abolition of the time-dominated abstraction of labour that forms the basis of value and is expressed in the market. It would destroy time as we now know it. Where would be the (Protestant) virtue in such a society? There would be no deferral, no need for market efficiency, no domination of humans by the need for such things, and thus no 'reward'—hence Rothbard's unconvincing insistence upon the opposite. Marxism is thus the ultimate nihilistic heresy.

The project of Marx, which the Austrians take care not to know, is nothing less than radical freedom through the destruction of abstract labour, and hence of value. The prospect of the abolition of value, and thus also the capitalist market, thus presents, for some, nothing less than the extinction of all morality, all possibility of goodness. Freedom from the capacity to be good. It is the final destruction of the Protestant Misery Ethic, enshrined in

'roundaboutness', and also of the moral authoritarianism that provides a refuge from alienation.

But this nihilism and rejection of goodness has only ever been positioned opposite the crass sadism of a worldview where value requires lack in order to exist, and where things are only worth something if someone is being deprived of them. Rothbard's explanation of action as being in pursuit of chosen goals attempts to enshrine this alienation at the core of things—to create a fundamental separation between an action and a desire.

Here, then, we get to the thing that must not be known—what Fromm calls 'freedom to.' Central to this notion is what Fromm calls spontaneity—"the realization of man's total personality, by the active expression of his emotional and intellectual potentialities." His primary example of this is artistic creativity, as well as the actions of small children. As he puts it:

> Most of us can observe at least moments of our own spontaneity which are at the same time moments of genuine happiness. Whether it be the fresh and spontaneous perception of a landscape, or the dawning of some truth as the result of our thinking, or a sensuous pleasure that is not stereotyped, or the welling up of love for another person—in these moments we all know what a spontaneous act is and may have some vision of what human life could be if these experiences were not such rare and uncultivated occurrences.

And yet the Austrian School has no place for these concepts. They are literally unthinkable within it, erased in the schism between action and goal that elides the basic truth that Fromm observes—"that there is only one meaning of life: the act of living itself." Scan *Human Action* for mentions of love and you will find a handful, yes, but the most substantive of them comes in the course of Mises noting that "neither love nor charity nor any other sympathetic sentiments but rightly understood selfishness is what originally impelled man to adjust himself to the requirements of society." And it is much the same for the other traits Fromm mentions as related to 'freedom to'—courage, decency, and kindness for instance. Mises' only invocation of courage is in the context of statesmen standing up to labor unions. Decency only comes up in the context of "laws of morality and decency." And his sole mention of kindness is a complete and grotesque misunderstanding of the very concept as he declares that "the indigent has no claim to the kindness shown to him," as if being unearned isn't the entire fucking point of kindness. It is a conception of human action without a shred of concern for empathy – human action devoid of all humanity.

The Austrians deny socialism's real content—the enabling of spontaneity—by always perverting it, in their view, into an authoritarian structure which they love to ponder. They make a fetish of these things. They fetishize Marxism, statism, authoritarianism. What could be more characteristic of fetishization

than that the object being fetishized—and perversely desired—is feared? But the real reason for this is that, more than anyone else, Marx provided an alternative to the charade on which their entire philosophical edifice was constructed. He showed the need for the destruction of that which, to them, gives the world meaning—and a method by which it might be achieved.

But it is the freedom entailed by this destruction that is the real terror. Freedom, after all, is the thing the Austrians fetishize most. It is the thing they fear the most. Fully realised, it would annihilate their very concept of meaning, which consists entirely of alienation, and replace it with one based on empathy. They are the ultimate ideological and moral expression of commodity fetishism—which give rise to them and then trapped them within itself. They are in a real sense the philosophical culmination of modernism's maxim "no ideas but in things," and in this regard they reveal where that dictat is desperate to avoid putting them instead: in people, where they might bloom in all their grandeur and monstrosity. Their entire ontology is based on 'freedom from', because 'freedom to' is not only too scary a prospect to be countenanced, it is too scary to even be decently understood.

Is any of this actually true? Well, individual human beings act… so it must be.

Lizard People, Dear Reader

David Icke's claim that the world was run by a cabal of extra-dimensional lizard people is, of course, ridiculous. But as anyone who's seen the inside of a department meeting can tell you, it's still more plausible than the idea that academia runs the world, so let's go with it. There is, after all, a pleasant tidiness to the idea of casting actual lizards in the role of basilisk. And the kitsch appeal of David Icke can hardly be understated, as countless British television producers in need of a slightly goofy segment can attest. A mediocre former football player and sports journalist turned new-age nutter prone to claiming that he was the son of the Godhead and that lizard people were secretly running the world is just the thing for a slow news day.

But while Icke is easy to laugh at, it's worth taking him seriously too, partially because what he offers has a genuine sinister streak and partially because the tendency to treat him purely as a source of amusement obscures the fact that there is actually a clear trajectory of thought that led Icke to the reptoid hypothesis. Not one, to be clear, that makes a goddamn bit of sense, nor one that actually goes anywhere, but one that is intelligible in its non-sense, with each new batshit idea building on the ones before. Icke's esoteric phase started with a fairly generic interest in new age spirituality, which began in the late 1980s along with his getting involved with the Green Party. For a couple of years he remained little more than your standard issue new age hippie, but in the early 90s his views became increasingly bizarre.

The trigger for this was a series of mystical experiences he interpreted as spiritual beings attempting to contact him psychically. I have zero interest in litigating the basic legitimacy of these revelations or visions. The main essay in this volume concludes with an extended rhapsody on the work of William Blake, after all. Nevertheless, it's important to recognize that the starting point of Icke's thought was the belief that he had special access to truths and revelations not available to ordinary people. Given this, it's not surprising that

he took on a somewhat messianic bent. But to his credit, his newfound status as the son of the Godhead was not entirely narcissistic. Instead, he asked eminently sensible questions about his revelations. For instance, if he could have a transformative mystical experience walking past a newspaper stand on the Isle of Wight, why wasn't everyone else in contact with the divine? What was holding the rest of humanity back?

These questions occupied his 1994 book *The Robots' Rebellion*, which contains the earliest version of the reptoid hypothesis, and which was also the book that prompted the Green Party to expel him over the book's frequent propensity towards anti-Semitism, most obviously a passage where he talks about the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an early 20th century forgery purporting to be the Jews' secret plan to rule the world. The book's thesis is straightforward: the reason we don't all achieve enlightenment is that "most people do not have a thought in their heads that has not been put there by someone or something else. We have become a race of programmed minds which can be persuaded to believe and do almost anything as long as the drip, drip, drip of lies and misinformation continues to bombard us through our political systems, the media, religion, schools, universities, and by infiltration of our consciousness by other universal sources which want to turn Planet Earth into a zombies' prison." The main one of these universal sources is a portion of the divine unity of creation that split off in rebellion, an imbalance in the universe which has only grown since. (Attentive readers will recognize this as the plot of *The Book of Urizen*.) But the result of this cascading imbalance is a sprawling conspiracy theory that includes everything from the Jews to extra-terrestrials.

Icke, of course, is not the first person to craft a meta-conspiracy theory that stitched together bits of other conspiracy theories into a new and even barmier whole. The most obvious thing to mention is Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea's *Illuminatus!* Trilogy, a postmodern comedy that by 1994 had already been adapted into absurdist dance music by Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty of the KLF, a feat that by all rights should have rendered Icke culturally unnecessary. But there are plenty of other examples. What's distinctive about Icke isn't the specific conspiracy he believes in, but rather its construction. Icke offers a specifically new age approach to conspiracy theories. Just like he's the sort of person who travels to an Incan burial site in order to have a kundalini awakening despite the kundalini being a serpentine force of energy out of Hindu mythology, he is the sort of person who casually jumps from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion to the secret history of the English Civil War to the Mafia with no real account of what connects

them save for the breathless energy with which he promises some imminent response to the vast conspiracy.

It is worth noting that this, more than any direct animosity towards Jews, seems to drive Ickes' anti-Semitism. Given that no small number of conspiracy theories are, in point of fact, anti-Semitic, any attempt to uncritically synthesize them will be as well. This is in no way a defense—anti-Semitism that's not motivated by immediate personal prejudice is not somehow better than good old fashioned visceral hatred. But it is still important to recognize that the usual criticism of Icke that his lizard people are simply stand-ins for the Jews is erroneous, wrongly positioning anti-Semitism as an end in itself, as opposed to an (admittedly significant) step in an argument careening towards a far stranger and, ultimately, sadder basilisk.

Once you've uncovered the vast conspiracy to enslave the human race, it would be ethically bankrupt not to fight back against it, and sure enough Icke's next couple of books progressively doubled down on the idea until, in 1999, he penned *The Biggest Secret: The Book That Will Change The World,* a book whose title is impressively un-hyperbolic, but whose subtitle is tragically optimistic. By this point, Icke was no longer framing the matter in the fundamentally optimistic terms of personal improvement than he had five years earlier. It's not that *The Robots' Rebellion* buries the lede, but its opening is still fundamentally rooted in hopefulness—Icke is searching for "the Big Question" and "the path that will lead us out of this mess." Sure, it takes him less than a page to start talking about a "monumental con-trick" and "a piece of black magic so successful that it has programmed the minds of billions of people to forget who they are, where they came from, and what they are doing here today," but there's still a clear sense that Icke sees the book as the first step in a process.

Compare this to *The Biggest Secret*, which opens with an extended rhetorical performance in which Icke weighs two approaches to beginning the book—holding back "information which is stunningly bizarre, but true" so as not to alienate readers, or "treat[ing] the readers like fully formed, fully connected, multidimensional adult human beings" and getting right to the weird stuff. After an extended denunciation of the idea that he would ever hold back from his readers or try to decide for them what they're ready for, he plows right into an explanation of how "a race of interbreeding bloodlines, a race within a race in fact, were centered in the Middle and Near East in the ancient world and, over the thousands of years since, have expanded their power across the globe." Revealingly, Icke engages in exactly the rhetorical move he swore he wouldn't, pointedly holding back until the second chapter the climactic

revelation that the interbreeding bloodlines are in fact alien reptiles from the constellation of Draco. (It's worth noting that Icke's tendency to treat constellations as though they were coherent star systems as opposed to arrangements of unrelated stars hundreds of light years apart that only form a coherent picture from the specific vantage point of Earth is shared by 1970s *Doctor Who*, which routinely uses "constellation" to mean "solar system." 1970s *Doctor Who* also, notably, featured a wide variety of monsters that resemble Icke's theories, including both shapeshifters, ancient lizards, and, in the case of 1975's *Terror of the Zygons*, actual shapeshifting lizards.)

As Icke continued to publish basically the same book every couple of years, his method of introduction continued to evolve. By his next book, 2001's *Children of the Matrix*, he was willing to introduce the lizard people more or less up front, though still after a preening introduction about how he's "someone who will go wherever the information takes him and who, thanks to hard and extreme experience in the early 1990s, let go of concern for what other people might think of him." The progression was briefly interrupted in 2002, when he opted to frame his book *Alice in Wonderland and the World Trade Center Disaster* around 9/11 trutherism instead of lizards, but even then his introduction gets right into "how the same interbreeding bloodlines that produced the kings and queens of the ancient world now produce the presidents, prime ministers, banking and business leaders, media owners and military chiefs of the 21st century," although he pointedly keeps the lizard people stuff out of this one, apparently not trusting that a reader roped in mainly by the promise of exposing the lie of 9/11 will be properly multidimensional. But by 2003, with *Tales from the Time Loop*, he was firmly back at it, proclaiming a new phase of his career via a book that served to summarize all the arguments he'd been making for years.

There's an overwhelming sense here of an intellectual trajectory that fails to launch. Perhaps the most striking moment of this non-progression comes in *Alice in Wonderland and the World Trade Center Disaster*, he speaks with what seems almost like irritation at the "1,500 pages detailing the story of human control" and additional "5,000 web pages of information" he's provided on the same topic, as though he resents that documenting the vast reptilian plot to enslave humanity has taken up so much of his valuable time. One assumes that in practice the actual value of that time softens the blow somewhat; he rakes in money hand over fist through his signature medium of ten hour lectures. Nevertheless, the point stands—for all the fireworks of his central premise he is spectacularly unable to get anything to follow from it.

Unexpectedly, the sensible reaction to finding out that the Queen of England is an extradimensional reptilian shapeshifter appears to be "so what?"

The late queer theorist and literary critic Eve Sedgwick relates a similar story at the start of her essay "You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," where she recalls a conversation with her friend Cindy Patton "sometime back in the middle of the first decade of the AIDS epidemic" about the numerous conspiracy theories surrounding the HIV virus. In Patton's view, these conspiracy theories—even the most sinister ones in which the virus was deliberately engineered to exterminate gay people—are simply uninteresting. "Even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes. Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things—what would we know then that we don't already know?" Icke's theory is much the same way. We know wealthy elites control our minds. Knowing they're lizards (or, for that matter, Jews) doesn't actually change anything. It is, to borrow a phrase, malignantly useless knowledge.

The last time Sedgwick's essay on paranoia came up we talked about her account of paranoia as a process of endless repetition. This comes from later in the essay, as part of a discussion of how "paranoia is characterized by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se —knowledge in the form of exposure," and how "paranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known." This too describes Icke to a tee. (Indeed, one of the most idiosyncratic characteristics of Illuminati-style conspiracy theories like his—the primary activity of their secret organizations inevitably turns out to be broadcasting their existence in the mass media via symbols that the conspiracy theorists elaborately decode without ever quite managing to explain why the nominally secret societies are constantly revealing themselves like this—is easily read as a sort of accelerated and projected version of this tendency whereby the conspiracy theorist assumes the conspirators must be paranoid in the exact same way.) But the context I first used it in was Mencius Moldbug, who displays exactly the same graphomaniacal failure to launch as Icke, who, for all his accomplishments, never actually manages anything quite as endearingly pathetic as passivism and the antiversity. The difference, as I noted at the start, is that for Moldbug the

conspiracy is rooted in academia, whereas Icke goes with the far more sensible-sounding lizard people.

But the really important thing is that lizard people and the Cathedral are performing basically the same functions in their respective systems. (And we might say the same thing about the God-AI in Yudkowsky, although shoehorning him into "conspiracy theory" is as awkward as it is illuminating.) On the one hand, both represent a sort of climactic and all-encompassing piece of knowledge—a master key that springs open every lock. On the other, however, neither piece of information actually leads anywhere useful. Knowledge of the pan-dimensional reptoids or the vast academic conspiracy stretching back to the English Civil War can, in practice, answer almost any question you might pose. The problem is simple: when every question has the same answer, the answer stops being useful. The homogenous sense of knowledge the conspiracy theory produces is fundamentally incapable of any sort of progress.

This is not quite a basilisk, at least not as we've previously understood the term. A basilisk depends on the precise motion of thought that the grand conspiracy theory is incapable of. Nor is it the inverse structure we've seen before of a horror that is being run from. Icke is horrified by the reptoids, yes, but he does not run from them, trying frantically to excise their very possibility from his worldview. This is a third type of horror—one that's imprisoning him from the start, and that he's acutely aware of, endlessly pacing the circumference of his tiny cell. The conspiracy theory is a basilisk in search of an argument to haunt; its stony gaze, lacking a target, turns back on itself.

It's worth actually abyss-gazing a bit here and looking at the internal motions of Icke's non-arguments. Let's do Chapter Twelve of *The Biggest Secret*, "The Black Sun," which is the chapter in which Icke explains Nazi Germany. He opens by speculating that Hitler was in fact Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's grandson, who Icke notes may have also been Jack the Ripper before possibly faking his own death and resettling in Germany. Then he gets into the connections between Hitler and Madame Blavatsky, who is either a British spy, an Italian revolutionary, or a member of an Egyptian secret society. Then he jumps to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's influence on Hitler, from which he, without actually having a clear chain of connections, gets to the Order of the Golden Dawn, and then on to Aleister Crowley, who he points out was not only an influence on Hitler but "an advisor to his fellow Satanist, Winston Churchill."

Having sorted out Hitler's influences, he moves on to what is admittedly an unsurprising line of thought, namely whether Hitler's famed rhetorical powers were supernatural or not. They were, obviously, which leads naturally into Nazi

occultism, so therefore Hitler was in contact with aliens from Aldebaran, specifically the Aryan Light God People. Not long after he makes a sharp transition to Nazi theories about the Earth being hollow, which is apparently true, but which results in four pages that don't actually have a thing to do with Nazis. Eventually Icke jumps back to the Nazis to talk about the Nazi flying saucer program, and then explains how the reptiles were actually funding both sides, and also Winston Churchill was a clone.

Not only does nothing follow from Icke's conclusions, nothing follows within the argument itself. Icke does not so much lay out a case for the lizard people as blunder among vague associations, hoping that the aggregate of a bunch of extremely tenuous connections will somehow be persuasive instead of a discombobulated mess of shoddy research and sloppy reasoning. He's not even consistent in his specious claims—at one point he has the German Workers Party being founded by the German Order/Teutonic Knights, while later it's founded by the Thule Society (who he'd earlier mentioned as a different offshoot of the German Order). It's not even that the whole is less than the sum of its parts. It's that the parts don't add up to anything in the first place. The same stasis that plagues the macro level affects the micro level as well, so that every single fact—even the handful that are actually true—fails utterly to mean anything.

Consider the big one—the revelation so tenuous that a book about how lizard people run the world only feels like it can get away with offering it as a supposition: that Hitler was also Queen Victoria's grandson and Jack the Ripper. What would be the significance of this fact? Yes, it would transform our understanding of World War II, but to what end? And I don't just mean this question in the sense of "we're so small and powerless, how could we ever hope to oppose these pan-dimensional lizard people," although Icke's eventual answer of "with the vibrational power of love" isn't exactly helpful. Do the lessons about the dangers of fascism and how it comes to power change if we know the charismatic leader was secretly British royalty? Is the ledger of horrors perpetrated by British imperialism extended significantly if Hitler happens to be Queen Victoria's descendent instead of just having been supported by Edward VIII? Ultimately, no. For all the radically counterfactual grandeur of Icke's alternate history, the fact is that none of his departures from established history manage to change the overall picture that much. The history of the world consists of a lot of wealthy assholes sleeping with each other and killing people. Changing up which assholes slept with and killed who doesn't actually make much of a difference.

Well, except for in one sense. What Icke provides, ultimately, is a sense that there's some sort of order and reason why history has taken the shape that it has. There's something more comforting about knowing that Hitler's rise to power was not, in fact, because a nation suffering a cataclysmic economic depression will rally around a racist demagogue no matter how incompetent, but rather because of a vast effort to fake the death of a misbehaving bit of British royalty or because of the instructions of the Aryan Light God People from Aldebaran. (In much the same way, it's comforting to believe that Russian propaganda efforts were dispositive in Trump's rise to power instead of one of several factors, and probably not one of the biggest ones.) Likewise, it's comforting to believe that somebody important committed the Ripper murders, as opposed to just being some guy who liked dismembering prostitutes. The idea that things happen for a reason—even a bad reason—is fundamentally more comforting than the idea that they don't. And while Icke occasionally takes pains to stress human responsibility, saying things like that "wars don't have to happen as part of some plan of God. We create them and if we change our inner self, our attitudes, we can stop creating them," this occasional counter-tendency pales in the face of his tendency to, for instance, call his book *The Biggest Secret: The Book That Will Change The World*.

But this also reveals why it is that the conspiracy theory's unwavering belief in the power of exposure and knowledge is so doomed. It's not just that the information isn't actually helpful in any direct way, nor that the information isn't actually that different from what we already know. It's that what we already know provides a fairly crushing demonstration of what knowledge and exposure can actually do. The horrors of what we already know are in most regards worse than those of Icke's ravings. A civilized country that's the wellspring of large swaths of western science and philosophy can be led to systematically kill millions by a deranged nut. There are people who butcher other people for sport. But being armed with that knowledge does precious little to prevent further horror. To pick a recent and apropos example, the knowledge that Donald Trump was an unstable and moronic crook was thoroughly exposed prior to the election. And we all know how that went. And so Icke's suggestion that if only everybody knew that it wasn't just ordinary human depravity but a vast conspiracy is, in a fundamental sense, wrongheaded.

It would be a shame to let a piece on lizard people conspiracy theories go by without at least one gratuitous overreach, so let's identify a final aspect of Icke's thought before we move on to conclusions. We've already talked about the unsatisfying way in which Icke answers every possible question with one

inherently unsatisfying answer. The scale of this is visible right on the cover of *The Biggest Secret*, a collage including the Statue of Liberty, the back of a US dollar bill, the English and United Nations flags, the logos of the UN, CIA, and Exxon, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, Queen Elizabeth, and Princess Diana. All of these disparate topics are united by a single, ultimate secret. It's a monotheistic conspiracy, in other words.

To some extent, of course, they all are. For all that different conspiracy theories focus on different secret societies that control the world, they basically never play off of each other. The CIA is never locked in an eternal battle against the Freemasons. The Knights Templar are never a failed rebellion against the reptilian overlords. It's never, in other words, a polytheistic worldview where there are a bunch of different conspiracies that are constantly tripping over each other, thus explaining why everything is such a mess. Indeed, much like Yudkowsky recreates a form of Protestantism in the form of Roko's Basilisk, Icke, for all he declares that "Christianity is a Pagan sun religion" that can be traced back to lizard-worshipping Mesopotamian cults, *The Robots' Rebellion* talks straightforwardly about the universal consciousness of God and the unbalanced "droplet" of consciousness that rebels against it, which he even goes ahead and calls Lucifer. While he's not entirely wrong when he points out certain shared viewpoints across large swaths of the world's religions, it's telling the degree to which his new age approach is decidedly not neopagan-inflected or even, for that matter, Hindu or Buddhist-inflected.

It's as easy to read too much into this with Icke as it would be with Yudkowsky. Even nutcases are products of their societies; you'd expect one raised in the US or UK to have Christian-inflected nuttery instead of Hindu-inflected. Rather, it is to suggest that the conspiracy theory is in some ways best understood as a deranged form of Occam's Razor in its original "entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity" form (a phrasing, and indeed principle, that originates in Christian philosophy). The conspiracy theory attempts to get by with a singular entity. The feat is madness, and the resulting worldview collapses into a spaghetti of insinuations that cannot be added back into a coherent whole, but it is the instinct towards singular, revelatory truths that drives the process.

The conclusion to take from this is not, obviously, that we should therefore multiply entities willy-nilly, or that the intellectual instinct towards pattern recognition and making connections is a bad one. Indeed, there is no particular reason to look towards the question of how to avoid falling into the intellectual pitfalls of reptoid conspiracy theories. I mean, if it's a thing you're

worried about, "avoid single vision and Newtons sleep" is a good bit of advice, but there are surely bigger questions to ask.

A more interesting line of thought, perhaps, is to consider what Icke gets right so as to consider what a version of his approach that doesn't derail into a tightly wound circle of empty repetition would look like. This, however, requires answering the somewhat tricky question of what the plus sides to Icke's approach actually are. One, obviously, is closely related to the obvious minus side, which is the basic inventiveness of "lizard people" as a solution. There is something intensely generative about blatant error—by its nature, it's able to access ideas and possibilities that cannot be reached through conventional means, some. Most of these are admittedly crap, but there's gold to be found as well. The first thing one needs, then, is a degree of self-awareness—one that goes beyond Icke's mere "I know this is hard to believe but I respect you enough to say it anyway" and into actually being in on the joke. If you suggest "lizard people" with anything other than a mischievous grin, you're definitely doing it wrong. The move's power comes in part from its unabashed transgressiveness. Indeed, in some ways this, and not any of the stuff like "basic understanding of how reality works," is really Icke's big error. The last thing you do when you're asserting that shapeshifting lizards run the world is apologize for doing so. That's basically a move you have to play with "yeah, make something of it, I dare you" brazen confidence, or, ideally, overconfidence.

But the move isn't just valuable for being the philosophical equivalent of wearing a flaming Viking helmet on your head and screaming "I AM THE GOD OF HELLFIRE" (to name a different approach to taking British television by storm). In a strictly logical sense, while starting from a true premise is a more reliable way of reaching true conclusions, starting from a false one enables you to reach a different set of true conclusions. Ridiculous arguments, especially ones that recognize their absurdity, are capable of revealing things that do not follow obviously, if at all, from self-consciously serious approaches, but that are nevertheless true and valuable realizations. Again, this is not actually something Icke does well. Indeed, it's pretty much the precise reason his work is a bust: it does not actually reveal anything new.

And yet for all of it, there are clearly instincts to admire in his methods. His focus on making unexpected connections is, generally speaking, a good way to work. So is his inclination to be skeptical of the "official" version of history. The value of this, to be clear, is not simply skepticism for its own sake (an approach that is just as likely to lead to things like climate change denial or creationism as it is to some productive insight), but rather the realization that,

as the saying goes, history is written by the victors, and the standard version of history is inevitably the one that most flatters those in power.

And then, of course, there are the lizards. It is not entirely clear why monstrous truth must take reptilian form, but just as the weird turns instinctively to tentacles and the hauntological inevitably drifts towards skulls, for some reason awful truth must take the form of a reptile, whether a petrifying basilisk or just a bunch of pan-dimensional aliens. Although two data points do not a trend make, other instances are easily found—for instance, the use of "lizard brain" to refer to primal knowledge existing on the level of animal instinct.

But the real thing to look at is Alan Moore. Moore has lightly haunted this entire piece (and indeed book); I very nearly quoted him a few pages back when talking about how conspiracy theories are more comforting than the alternative, because he's made that exact point before saying, "the truth of the world is that it is chaotic. The truth is, that it is not the Jewish banking conspiracy or the grey aliens or the 12 foot reptiloids from another dimension that are in control. The truth is more frightening, nobody is in control. The world is rudderless." But for our purposes, the more important thing about him is that he is the sole remaining worshipper of Glycon, who is, conveniently, a snake god.

Actually—and this is really the key part for Moore—he's a puppet snake god. In Moore's view, in fact, this was the point for everyone. He contends (on little evidence, to be fair, but still more credibly than Icke ever does) that Glycon's entire cult always knew he was a puppet, and that this was the source of his power, advancing the idea of representing gods in works of physical art into representing gods as performance. As Moore puts it (or rather has Glycon put it), "I am demonstrably the last-created Roman deity. A divine idea, dressed in mind-altering and spellbinding theatre. I am the last god. No more were needed after me, because with me, at last, they got it right."

Moore, in other words, draws a fundamental association between reptiles and the human tendency towards abstraction. And he makes it very clear that he means this general case, as opposed to traditional theology, talking about how "people chose to think they had ideas, rather than that ideas had them. Vast populations were moved this way and then that by immaterial concepts—economics, politics, religion—unaware of their manipulation by these spectral entities." In this regard, then, Icke is revealed to be right. There really are strange lizards that, as Moore puts it, "work us. That supply our every word." For all that he errs in taking this idea too literally, imagining that this means the Queen of England is a literal reptile, the broad strokes are spot on. It's just

that Icke cannot ultimately imagine any response to the profusion of lizards that does not amount to a sort of dazed and impotent paralysis. He does not recognize the alternative possibility: that we could confront our reptilian overlords in all their grandeur and monstrosity. No, the world cannot be made sense of; there is no biggest secret that will finally make it all click into place. Instead, the world is interesting.

My Vagina is Haunted: Notes on TERFs

To Phil, for starting it so I could finish

"You have to get out of here! Your vagina is haunted!" —Jim Balent, Tarot: Witch of the Black Rose

This is a leftist book, and so must engage in a circular firing squad at least once. In the interests of discharging this solemn responsibility with minimal collateral damage, let's pick a soft target: TERFs, or Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminists. Basically, ardent feminists for whom a primary concern is defending cis womanhood from trans women. In the interests of a swift execution, we'll describe Cathy Brennan, a Maryland-based lawyer whose clients include a staggeringly ghastly litany of "mortgage loan companies, mortgage loan servicers, Internet lenders, consumer finance companies, title loan companies and payday lenders." When she's not helping capitalism murder poor people, her hobbies include extended and breathtakingly vicious harassment campaigns against trans women in which she doxes them, posts nude photos of them to her blog, and contacts their doctors and employers in order to intimidate them. And then, when she really needs to unwind from all that being as evil as actively possible, she searches Facebook to find people who call her a "fake goth" so she can report them. So there, see? It's settled: TERFs are awful.

But why is this fact at all interesting? It's not simply the bad behavior. Yes, TERFs have embraced harassment techniques that are virtually indistinguishable from Gamergate, but the fact that there are assholes on the left as well as the right is neither surprising nor revealing. Nor is the mere fact of a nominally leftist faction that has in practice repeatedly found reliable allies

on the right. If it were, we'd have to be fascinated by the existence of Tony Blair. There's no horseshoe theory to be confirmed here—TERFs can't be used as a straightforward example of the far left with any honesty. They're an edge case, to be sure, but not in the banally straightforward "take a position to its logical endpoint" way.

Still, we're clearly circling around a thing, which is the relationship between TERFs and the right. On the one hand, in many cases the leftist credentials of TERFs are genuinely sound. The seminal TERF book, Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, acknowledges the contributions and help of Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, and Andrea Dworkin, while TERF arguments have been advanced by well-known feminists like Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem. These figures are certainly not above critique on the left, and indeed their views on transgender people have opened them up to quite a lot of it, but there's clearly no shortage of sensible definitions of "leftist" that they meet and exceed. On the other hand, there is clearly a point where they visibly take whatever radical and visionary thought they have made in their careers and say, "This, and no further."

Unsurprisingly, this has obvious rhetorical appeal for the right. The reformed progressive has always been a popular figure, hence the old chestnut about how "anyone who isn't a liberal at the age of 25 has no heart, but anyone who is still a liberal at the age of 35 has no brain." And it's not hard to see why this it appeals to them—it provides an eternally useful cudgel against the idea of progress run amok. "See, the left has gone so far off the deep end that even Andrea Dworkin has turned on them for it." But encoded in this are several assumptions, most obviously about the very nature of "progress," that require interrogation.

This is, however, a firing squad, and so there is a duty first and foremost to be precise in the charges. And while TERFs can be rightly convicted on the charge of collaboration, desertion is a bridge too far. Their virulent hatred of trans people may discredit them, but it does not and cannot erase them from feminist history. And while some of the TERFs under discussion are relatively minor figures in the history of feminism whose notability is entirely due to their anti-trans positions, others were major figures in the movement back in their heydays. Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* changed lives, often for the better, sending countless intellectual trajectories down more liberating and visionary paths. Gloria Steinem and Andrea Dworkin's activism still accomplished the good things it accomplished as well as the bad. History still exists, and while the reappraisal of that history can decide whether in the final analysis their bigotries outweigh that good, it cannot simply transmute

the whole of their work (even the bits with no obvious connections to their TERF positions) into counterrevolutionary reaction any more than Steinem's belated recanting of her transphobic views in a 2013 piece for *The Advocate* can erase the harm done by her 1977 essay on the matter—which remains in print without clarification in her collection *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*.

The obvious focal point, then, is the actual trans-exclusive work of TERFs so that we can understand how it fits, however jarringly in hindsight, within the larger rubric of feminist projects. I will not bother refuting the bulk of these arguments. For one thing, I simply decline to dignify the furious rejection of my basic identity with that kind of labor. For another the work has already been done, and done well; those who want to learn why the bulk of arguments made by TERFs and other virulent transphobes are bunk can consult Zinnia Jones's work at *Gender Analysis* or Julia Serano's work on her own site. My interest is not in debating TERFs, but in understanding them as a pathology.

To this end, let's turn our attention to *The Transsexual Empire*, this being a clear mother text within the genre. The book is adapted from Raymond's dissertation, completed under the supervision of Mary Daly, and quickly became the go-to text for feminists who wanted to argue against the validity of trans people—Steinem relies heavily on it in her anti-trans essay, for instance.

From a contemporary perspective, it is difficult to see how the book could have left the footprint it did—one that included Raymond successfully lobbying the US government to make an official report advocating against insurance covering transition expenses and particularly genital reconstruction surgery—a policy that put needed health care out of financial reach for a staggering number of trans women, and that is only now starting to be unwound. Even its 1994 second edition, with its cover boasting a "new introduction on transgender," which she seems to think is a noun referring to the broader phenomenon of gender nonconformity and critiques as a demonstration of how feminism has become "a style rather than a politics of resistance," is dated in ways that go far beyond the mere facts of its bigotry. And yet its bigotry is drippingly clear, in the same methodically cruel manner as Vox Day's. Raymond makes great show of using male pronouns to describe trans women, going out of her way to make explicit that she does not do this "in the commonly accepted, pseudogeneric sense" but "to reinforce the fact that the majority of transsexuals are men." Similarly, Raymond repeatedly uses the baroquely awkward phrase "male-to-constructed female," a mouthful of words that serves mainly to elongate the space that the act of denying the validity of their gender can take up, allowing the book to tarry in the act of

disavowal. It's impossible to read more than a few paragraphs of the book before the evident pleasure Raymond takes in her own righteousness becomes overpowering.

Raymond's argument, meanwhile, is similarly excessive. She is not content merely to delegitimize trans women. She has to further assert that their entire existence is part of a "sociopolitical program that is undercutting the movement to eradicate sex-role stereotyping and oppression" enacted on the part of "dominating medical/psychiatric fathers who *create* artificial women." Not only are they not women, in other words, they are engineered threats to the very idea of womanhood, living Frankensteins weaponized in the fight to retain patriarchal control over the world.

It's worth stressing how fundamentally and savagely unkind this approach is, especially when combined with her basic contempt for trans women. She moves freely between these two aspects of her argument, creating a sense that she never actually has to come out and state whereby trans women are morally culpable for whatever psychiatric manipulation they have undergone at the hands of the evil medical industry. It's for the best that she does not make this leap explicit, because when said out loud the magnitude of its bad faith becomes breathtaking. Even if one were to grant her argument against the validity of trans women's gender—and it should be stressed that this argument spectacularly begs the question, such as when she privileges chromosomal sex as "the fundamental basis for maleness and femaleness" for the precise reason that it, unlike anatomical, legal, endocrinal, or psychological definitions, cannot easily be changed—and her conspiracy-minded claims about surgical treatment for gender dysphoria, there is no reason in any of her explicit premises why individual trans women should be culpable for the ideological strictures in which they are ensnared.

It is a mistake, however, to understand this tendency primarily as an abstracted flaw in Raymond's reasoning. Its real horror lies not in its formal sloppiness but in its cruelty. Consider, for instance, her attack on Sandy Stone, a trans woman who spent the late 70s as a sound engineer for the lesbian feminist collective Olivia Records, a fact that led to significant protest from TERFs, who harassed Stone and Olivia Records for years, including with death threats. Raymond complains that Stone came to play "a very dominant role" in the collective, which, combined with "the national reputation and visibility" that followed her being repeatedly threatened by TERFs, led her presence to "divide women, as men frequently do when they make their presence necessary and vital to women." Raymond suggests that "having produced such divisiveness, one would think that if Stone's commitment to and identification

with women were genuinely woman-centered, he would have removed himself from Olivia and assumed some responsibility for the divisiveness," while opining that Olivia should have "acknowledged the maleness of Sandy Stone and perhaps the necessity, at the time, to employ a man in this role."

What's insidious about all of this is the complete lack of any attention whatsoever to the question of what Stone or her sisters at Olivia might have thought about this. Raymond doesn't just misgender Stone; she acts as though Stone is deliberately wielding masculinity in her interactions with other women. At one point, she compares Stone's visibility to another trans woman who was "coaching a women's softball team, coordinating a conference on women and violence, staffing a women's center, and performing musically at various all-women places," apparently astonished that a trans woman would have the audacity to seek out women's spaces. It goes without saying that Stone was not, in fact, thinking of herself as a male infiltrator into lesbian feminist spaces, by which I mean that Raymond literally never says a thing about fact that Stone's gender identity is sincerely held, instead taking her failure to consider herself at fault for the death threats she was getting as evidence of her bad faith. Similarly, the fact that Olivia Records stood by Stone, repeatedly reiterating that they accepted her gender and that "to us, Sandy Stone is a person, not an issue" is essentially ignored, with Raymond relegating all discussion of Olivia's position to an endnote where she summarizes their argument without ever suggesting that anything whatsoever might follow from it.

It is clear, in other words, that this goes beyond any straightforward argumentative lapse in which Raymond carelessly conflates her argument about the broad sociopolitical effects of trans people and her argument about the validity of their gender to ascribe the agenda of the vast transsexual empire in its entirety to individual trans people. Rather, Raymond is deliberately operating in the gap between the two arguments. She's not being careless in disregarding the entire question of trans people's lived experiences; she just hates trans people so much that she can't even imagine that they might have interiority beyond the nefarious agenda she projects onto them.

But while the pathologies of Raymond's argument are clear in hindsight, they demonstrably were not at the time. Instead, her book took off and became widely influential within feminist circles, with her framing of trans women as a threat to cis womanhood being taken at face value. Why this should be is not hard to discern. Second-wave feminism has been widely criticized for the degree to which it centralizes white middle class women as the main subject of feminism, with the concerns of other women being

pushed to the margins. The largest thrust of this criticism has focused on racial dynamics—third-wave feminism began with Rebecca Walker's 1992 critique of feminism's excessive whiteness, for instance. And many of the people who have most blatantly advanced TERF arguments have also had significant fuckups when dealing with race, such as Gloria Steinem's frankly pathetic efforts to argue for nominating Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama in 2008 on the grounds that black suffrage had come before women's suffrage so electing a woman was more important, or Mary Daly's exceedingly disingenuous handling of Audre Lorde's criticisms of her selective invocations of black culture. And race is something second wave feminists were at least superficially conscious about. That the second wave would be eager to attack a group of women who didn't have any political clout to speak of if doing so could be presented as a defense of their narrow conception of womanhood is depressingly predictable.

More interesting is the question of why this matters. After all, for all that the second wave routinely screwed up in its treatment of race, this isn't generally used as a cudgel to discredit them. Nobody tries to argue for no-platforming them over their myriad failures. Yes, some of this is that their issues with race tend to be less clear-cut in their offensiveness than, for instance, Germaine Greer's infamous "just because you lop off your penis" comments. But this doesn't erase the fact that there's been a massive shift in the underlying identity politics in the thirty-eight years since *The Transsexual Empire* saw publication. Superficially, at least, this seems like it might validate Raymond's argument. What better evidence of the insidious and creeping power of the transsexual empire than the fact that calling for trans people to be "morally mandated out of existence" has gone from being something that gets you celebrated in the upper echelons of the feminist community to something that gets you ostracized?

Which brings us back neatly to the question of TERFs and reactionaries. Because whatever the differences in their starting premises are, the question of why there are big shifts in the realm of what's acceptable fascinates both. Why Janice Raymond has gone from hero to zero is, after all, essentially the same question as Mencius Moldbug's famed musing over why "Cthulhu only swims left." And though there's clearly lots to dislike about the people fascinated with it, that doesn't actually invalidate the question. There is, in fact, something interesting going on here. For instance, there was a clear sense starting a decade or so ago that trans rights were the next big frontier in civil rights issues once the by-then-clearly-over-the-tipping-point gay marriage issue was settled. And sure enough, in the wake of Obergefell v. Hodges, trans rights

dutifully emerged. One need not be displeased with this turn of events to be curious how that hyperstition functioned.

The contrast with Moldbug's wider anxiety, at least, serves to rule out Raymond's hypothesis; whatever process is at work here is not unique to trans rights. Equally, Moldbug's account of the process, and indeed his entire notion of perpetual leftist progress, is also a steaming load of gibberish. The fact that it is possible to see a civil rights struggle coming in advance is not down to some externally ordained sequence of causes, whether emanating from the Orwellian mind control schemes of academia, Lovecraftian Great Old Ones, or the moral arc of the universe. What we're looking for is, unsurprisingly, a messier and more complicated process than that.

Perhaps the most obvious and fundamental thing to realize is that the question of what's next is dependent on what came before. Which is to say that the reason why trans rights were a predictable next frontier is likely to be related to the struggle for gay rights that it succeeded. On one level, this feels obvious. The acronym "LGBT" has been in use for decades, after all, and so it's clear that the issues have always been linked. But those links are neither accidental nor based purely on some overarching concept of queerness—they're born of material circumstances and history. And an awful lot of that history has consisted of the L and G part of the acronym spectacularly selling out trans people (and often being dicks to the bisexuals along the way). The standard history of the gay rights movement, for instance, starts with Stonewall in 1969, as opposed to the Compton's Cafeteria riot in 1966. This is significant, as the Compton's Cafeteria riot was unambiguously a trans riot, and led directly to the creation of a network of trans activists in San Francisco. But instead of treating these activists as the start of the larger movement the origin is pushed back to 1969 and Stonewall. In truth trans people were also central to what happened at Stonewall, but the political organizations that emerged from Stonewall—most notably the Gay Liberation Front—did not reflect this fact, instead focusing more narrowly on gay rights.

This was not, to be clear, an accident. This was conscious decision-making on the part of people whose names the trans community remembers—an active campaign waged by people like Jim Fouratt, who accuses trans women of being "misguided gay men who'd undergone surgical mutilations," and who was instrumental in the Gay Liberation Front's decision to strip protections for trans people out of a proposed New York City non-discrimination ordinance on the grounds that they would be "too extreme." This set a pattern whereby trans rights were repeatedly employed by the gay rights movement as a bargaining chip—as the thing they were pointedly willing to sell out in the

name of compromise, as they spectacularly did when lobbying for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which excluded trans people in every version that was brought to Congress prior to 2009. Again, there are specific people to blame here: former Human Rights Campaign director Elizabeth Birch, for instance, who publicly declared that trans people would be included in the ENDA over her dead body; or Barney Frank, whose propensity to get into shouting matches about "penises in bathrooms" when the matter was brought up was well documented. (Like Steinem, Frank eventually meandered to the right side of history, supporting an inclusive ENDA in 2009 while offering a spectacularly revisionist view of his previous work against trans rights.) For all that they were titularly adjoined to the gay rights movement, trans people were in effect only there so that the gay rights movement had something to score victories at the expense of.

Elsewhere in this book I have advocated the practice of haunting the future, suggesting that in the face of seemingly inevitable doom the soundest tactic is to craft hyperstitions, committing to a later reckoning. But the aggressively predictable (and indeed predicted) emergence of trans rights as a political struggle presents us with a case study. We are living in a future haunted by trans narratives. With the massive victory of Obergefell v. Hodges secured, the bill at last came due for the preceding forty-six years of trans culture's suppression in favor of gay culture. The boot came off the neck, and almost immediately trans voices became audible in ways they simply hadn't been just a few years before.

It is worth stressing that treating a large scale cultural narrative of this sort as if it were authored is a figure of speech, and a misleading one at that. There is no credit due to the gay rights movement for successfully orchestrating the succession. Given the historical reality that trans voices were at the dawn of the modern gay rights movement more organized in their activism, there is no serious way to read the decades-long strategy of throwing them under the bus as doing anything but delaying victories for trans rights. The people directly responsible for burying trans voices—Fouratt and Raymond, for instance—did not change their tune in the wake of marriage equality. The forces that were making trans voices into objects of gothic repression waiting to furiously re-emerge finally dissipated not because of a sudden reversal of policy, but because the gay rights movement had become singularly focused on marriage equality as a policy goal and its achievement resulted in the dissipation of the gay rights movement in general, transphobic elements and all. Indeed, it's worth noting that just a few months after the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision, there was a high-profile manifesto demanding that the gay

rights movement "drop the T" on the grounds that the transgender community is "ultimately regressive and actually hostile to the goals of women and gay men." This went nowhere (although, surprising nobody, Milo Yiannopoulos vocally embraced the petition in a Breitbart post), and the backlash from organizations like GLAAD and the HRC was ultimately considerably louder than the underlying change.org petition, but the existence and timing of the call is hard not to read as an ostentatious attempt to pull up the ladder once the trans rights movement was done providing its needed cover.

Nor do I want to romanticize the emergence of trans rights as an active struggle. Just as the progression to trans rights was not an inevitable consequence of the universe's inherent morality there is no inherent reason why the struggle has to be won. Indeed, being the current hotbed of civil rights activism is in practice just as much about being a target for new and more vicious repression as it is about winning gains. The wave of bathroom bills that kicked off with North Carolina's famed HB2 are a direct consequence of trans rights being the "it" issue. Prior to their post-Obergefell emergence, the idea of passing a bill in order to make being trans in public a constant matter of humiliation and danger didn't really come up. Panic about "keeping men out of women's bathrooms" was periodically used as a cudgel to attack civil rights legislation aimed at gay people, and there was an effort at a bathroom bill in Arizona in 2013, but it came to nothing and didn't spawn a wave of imitators, whereas North Carolina's bill was immediately and widely copied in other conservative states. Targets are, after all, not generally defined by their invisibility. More broadly, while the rapidly unfolding events could well result in significant gains for trans people, including the reversal of the Raymond-instigated barriers to health care, and indeed have made those gains more likely, they have also made it more likely that trans people will be the scapegoats in a fascist rise to power. The hyperstition was the confrontation, not the result.

This forced confrontation is implicit in the notion of haunting, which simultaneously conveys spectral intangibility and inescapable immediacy. The intangibility, as we've seen, comes from a history of oppression and suppression that drives the haunter underground. But the immediacy comes from the fact that to haunt is to be monstrous. Deriving from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning an omen, and closely related to a bunch of other Latin words with meanings circling around the act of showing and looking, monstrosity is fundamentally defined as that which confronts. We've seen no shortage of monsters over the course of this book, generally staring back at

lines of thought from their unintended endpoints. But we have yet to develop anything like a general theory of monstrosity.

This is, of course, something of a white whale in certain schools of philosophy. So instead let's do what we usually do and use the occasion to take a swerve into an idiosyncratic topic that serves our own nefarious ends. To wit, let us consider the case of Mary Daly. Of the high profile TERFs, Daly is by some margin the one who requires the most intricate moral judgment. Like Greer or Steinem, her vicious transphobia exists as part of a larger career. But with Greer and Steinem, other thinkers and activists with comparable viewpoints and accomplishments exist, so that someone inclined towards enshrining them within their personal pantheon of feminist thinkers has viable alternatives lacking in vicious bigotry. Mary Daly, however, is wholly singular —a properly visionary philosopher and theologian. Her early work simply sought to interrogate and displace the notion of a patriarchal God, but as her career developed she began to develop an increasingly complex alternative theology that was fully and radically separate from masculinity. This process began in her 1978 book *Gyn/Ecology*, which she describes as a "journey of women becoming." This, however, understates things. A more thorough explanation is that, "First, there is the fact that be-ing continues. Be-ing at home on the road means continuing to Journey. This book continues to Spin on, in other directions/dimensions. It focuses beyond christianity in Other ways. Second, there is some old semantic baggage to be discarded so that Journeyers will be unencumbered by malfunctioning (male-functioning) equipment. There are some words which appeared to be adequate in the early seventies, which feminists later discovered to be false words." The idiosyncratic capitalization and odd pun-constructions quickly came to overwhelm her work, which became focused on creating an entirely new mode of language that would be free from patriarchal oppression, culminating in *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, a glossary/exegesis of this language in which "spelling" refers to the literal casting of spells and "grammar" is etymologically linked to "glamour" and refashioned into a "witches' hammer." The book is, by its own admission, a "Labyrinthine design [that] may appear twisted and contorted to those accustomed only to linear patterns such as graphs and charts. In fact, its order is organic and purposeful, and it can be compared to a flock of Wild fowl in flight."

This is a ruthlessly idiosyncratic approach with limited applicability to people who are not Mary Daly. And Daly is perfectly aware of this, saying that "Websters therefore invite Wild women of other tribes and tongues to weave

their own Wickedaries" which "will not be called *Wickedaries*, but will have their own untranslatable titles." But that is in many regards the appeal of Daly's work. You can't expand the realm of what's thinkable without being the only person out there. And make no mistake—Daly was unquestionably and in many regards wonderfully "out there." She doggedly pushed past the boundaries of the world into strange new places, and made a home for herself there. And yes, eventually we're going to find that her transphobia is a fatal tether to the world that brings her crashing out of the transcendent and Wild cosmos she Weaves. But let's put that off for a few more paragraphs and allow ourselves to stay out here. I promised monsters, after all.

And Daly is full of them. Her worldview, starting in *Gyn/Ecology*, which she positions as a work of Hag-ography, a word she coins by taking the word "hagiography" (an impeccably reverential biography of a saint), reducing it to the Greek root of *hagios*, or holy, and merging it with the Old English *hag*, which she fully embraces in its meanings such as "nightmare" and "a female demon." And in the *Wickedary* she offers definitions for countless monsters of femininity (and I mean that literally, in that her Word-Web is so ornate and full of interdependent definitions that it's actually impossible to draw firm lines as to what does and doesn't count) alongside things like the abominable snowmen of andocratic academia. Her definition of "Crone" is particularly illustrative: "Great Hag of History, long-lasting one; Survivor of the perpetual witchcraze of patriarchy, whose status is determined not merely by chronological age, but by Crone-logical considerations; one who has Survived early stages of the Otherworld Journey and who therefore has Dis-covered depths of Courage, Strength, and Wisdom in her Self." And her definition of Be-Monstering is perfect for our purposes, focusing on an obsolete definition of monster as "something unnaturally marvelous." What Daly is offering, in other words, is a version of monstrosity that not only embraces both suppression and immediacy, but that promises that the space from which the world is haunted has a vast cosmology of its own to live in and explore. It is literally the best of both worlds—the broken world of oppression gets haunted, while the world of the oppressed gets its own independent and valid existence.

Perhaps her most fascinating discussion of all of this comes at the end of *Pure Lust*, her 1984 follow-up to *Gyn/Ecology*, in a chapter called "Be-Witching: The Lust for Metamorphosis." In it, she offers a rapturous account of "the actual leaping/hopping/flying that is Metamorphosis," "the creation of Fairy Space," and of becoming "Shape-shifters, in ontological dimensions." It's a *tour de force*, routinely and vividly compelling. And, of course, its implications

for trans identities are shatteringly profound. Or at least, they could be. Except, of course, this is Janice Raymond's thesis advisor. And with a snap, our inter-galactic Journey crashes back to Earth.

Actually, it doesn't even. Daly's contemptuous blind spot is so extensive that she does not even bring up the possibility to shoot it down. Save for a passage late in the chapter in which she suggests that the "christian god" is analogous to Dustin Hoffman's character in *Tootsie*, Daly doesn't even mention the idea of gender itself being a metamorphosis. The possibility is instead abandoned, given a limitless silence from which to haunt Daly's thought.

Plenty of people have stepped into this breach. Some did so in ways that explicitly jumped off from the ragged and blood-stained edge of TERF thought. Sandy Stone, for instance, eventually left the record industry to become an academic, studying under Donna Haraway and penning "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" in 1987. The essay riffs heavily on *The Transsexual Empire*—Stone includes Raymond in her acknowledgments section "for playing Luke Skywalker to my Darth Vader"—but also draws on Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," talking about how "the multiple dissonances [that] the transsexual body imply produce not an irreducible alterity but a myriad of alterities, whose unanticipated juxtapositions hold what Donna Haraway has called the promises of monsters —physicalities of constantly shifting figure and ground that exceed the frame of any possible representation." Raymond, for her part, sneers in the introduction to the 1994 re-release of *The Transsexual Empire* that "it seems that Stone has gotten himself a thorough postmodernist education, and he now theorizes that, after all is said and done, the transsexual is really text, or perhaps a full-blown genre," an objection that, it has to be said, is pretty fucking rich coming from Mary Daly's thesis student.

Taking off more directly from Daly's work is Susan Stryker's 1994 essay, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," which starts with Daly's connection between genital reconstruction surgery and Frankenstein's monster. Stryker places Daly in the large and ugly tradition of stigmatizing trans women as deformed and freakish constructs of medicine, but then declares that she will "lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity" by drawing power from the precise fact that her body and identity go against "nature," and from the anger that follows from being created by nature but against it, concluding: "Though we forego the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth."

And, of course, there is the recent publication of Andrea Long Chu's barnstorming essay "On Liking Women," which takes the bull by the horns and makes the obvious point that trans women are a basilisk haunting radical feminism, in that they "are separatists from our own bodies. We are militants of so fine a caliber that we regularly take steps to poison the world's supply of male biology. To TERFs like Jeffreys, we say merely that imitation is the highest form of flattery. But let's keep things in perspective. Because of Jeffreys, a few women in the Seventies got haircuts. Because of us, there are literally *fewer men on the planet*. Valerie [Solanas], at least, would be proud. The Society for Cutting Up Men is a rather fabulous name for a transsexual book club."

But these academically-minded works are at this point quite literally old news—part of the long and meticulous haunting that defined the trans rights movement and laid the groundwork for its post-Obergefell emergence. Already the trans rights movement has grown more complex than the one that Stone and Stryker emerged from. Trans men, although still often treated as secondary to trans women, are far more visible than in years past, while notions of what gender is in the first place are being expanded to include non-binary, agender, and genderqueer people. Even within the context of trans women things are changing, as the narrow model of "I felt like a woman trapped in a man's body" gives way to a wider range of ways to be trans. As the ghosts buried by Raymond and Daly and the rest of the TERFs rise up to have their reckoning, the subterranean spaces they carved out take up new inhabitants seeking to bring new terrors to the future.

To close, then, a collection of fragments—sketches of some unnamed and unnameable presence. For instance, a 2007 piece by blogger Little Light entitled "the seam of skin and scales" calls for "a feminism of the monstrous" that is "for the cobbled-together, the sewn-up, the grafted-on. It is for the golden, the under-the-earth, the foreign, the travels-by-night; the filthy ship-sinking cave-dwelling bone-cracking gorgeousness that says hell no, I am not tidy. I am not easy. I am not what you suppose me to be," and "for the Gorgons and the vampires and the chimaeras, for Cybele and Baba Yaga, Hel and Ashtoreth, for Lamia and Scylla, for Kali and Kapo 'ula-kina'u. This is for all of them with teeth." There's a whole Tumblr site, *Gender Terror*, devoted to looking at horror from a queer and specifically trans perspective, including an article called "Monsters Of Our Own: Monster Symbolism in the Trans Community" that interviews a smattering of trans folks about their relationship with monstrosity. ("Thinking of werewolves was a great outlet. Their bodies change but on a schedule; they're animals and don't have to

follow the social niceties expected of humans; they aren't going to get bullied; to be honest, if you see a werewolf you're probably not going to ask if it's a boy or a girl," says one.) And there's a host of smaller stuff—artists like Moss Angel whose novel *Sea-Witch* is described as "a genre-phobic novel-in-fragments of contemporary transsexuality that focuses on the life of a girl monster named Sara who lives inside a witch-god named Sea-Witch. Follow the occult fairytale story of how this young monster came to be, of the origins of Sea-Witch, of Sea-Witch's god family that preceded her & of 78 Men Who Cause Pain by using their laws and cops against monsters like Sea-Witch. Also there's lots of hot trans-on-trans sex." Or, to pick a slightly more inside baseball example, Sam Keeper's walking simulator *A Host of Gentle Terrors*, which features trans people being kept as pets because of their capacity for channelling dysphoria into magical energy and in spite of their occasional propensity to literally explode into weird monsters.

My point in offering this litany is not to argue that these are major works likely to have the historical legacies that Stryker or Stone's pieces have already demonstrated. It's not even to make some empirical case for the existence or centrality of trans monstrosity, or to provide a comprehensive survey of what's out there. These are not judgments that could possibly be made from within the superlative mess of the present moment. I offer them not as proof of anything, but rather as a field report—a dispatch not from the front lines, but from the depths where the ghosts that will haunt the future are being birthed, tenebrous and unfathomable. Nothing follows from this. It is not a train of thought careening towards its unexpected basilisk. The monstrosity it offers is of another breed entirely. It will not come into focus. It will not clarify or cohere. But more importantly, it will not die.

If I were you I'd script a better future
Recite the words aloud til they were true
I'd sing until I'm someone else
Cause stoic or seducer
Someone else is gonna sing until she's you
—Seeming, "If I Were You"

Zero to Zero: A Final Spin Around the Shuddering Abyss at the Heart of All Things

Slow pan across the conspiracy wall—conceptual map of photos and red string sketching the interior of a space whose edges rapidly expand to encompass everything there is. Here acceleration is best understood in terms increasing density, our sense of the thing collapsing into gravitational singularity as more and more connections become revealed. Milo Yiannopoulos e-mails Curtis Yarvin to have him check over his Breitbart article on the alt-right, who heads over to Peter Thiel's house to watch election results. Mike Cernovich publishes a book with Vox Day before becoming Donald Trump Jr's favorite conspiracy theorist. And of course, Milo wrote the introduction to *SJWs Always Lie*, and was bankrolled by Robert Mercer along with the rest of the Breitbart empire. There is no center here; not even the ruined, nameless thing within the Oval Office. There's just a void—a historical calamity emanating out from nothing save for a morbid but systemic lust for its occurrence.

Still, the nature of abyss-gazing is that you have to focus your attention somewhere. One measures a circle and all. So let's take an odd spot of double vision within the churning nullity: Robert Mercer and Peter Thiel. In many regards they are two of a kind—billionaire tech barons with data analytics companies (Cambridge Analytica and Palantir, respectively) who use their fortunes to bankroll alt-right extremists. And yet, perhaps oddly, relatively few pieces of red string run directly between the two. Thiel attended a costume party of Mercer's in December of 2016 (dressed as Hulk Hogan, natch), and dumped a bunch of money into a Mercer-bankrolled PAC late in the election, and it's recently emerged that Palantir and Cambridge Analytica had an

informal but friendly relationship that involved Palantir getting access to Cambridge Analytica's dodgily acquired pool of Facebook data.

It is, of course, folly to conclude anything from the absence of a connection, even if the most probable explanation is simply a need for further research. But the connection is not really the point, and thinking otherwise is how you get David Icke. There's no climactic piece of information around which all the data will suddenly organize into explicability. This is madness; sense is the one thing it cannot possibly make. But Mercer and Thiel provide the closest thing to an unmoved mover within this web. To treat them as masterminds orchestrating events would be as foolish as inferring the existence of a deep connection from its lack of visibility. That just isn't how this works. But it is still worth asking what an architect of this maelstrom would look like. If such a thing could be designed, what would its watchmaker look like? And for this, people like Mercer and Thiel who aspire to do so are useful.

Of the two, Mercer is by some margin more reclusive and difficult to pin down. Thiel, on the other hand, has co-authored two books, and his life and interests are relatively well documented. And as he was something of a haunting presence back in the main text of this book, he seems a fitting place to end it. Once more unto the gyre.

The first thing to note is that there is nothing revealing, or indeed remotely interesting about Thiel's actual ideological beliefs. He is clearly a crypto-neoreactionary, his "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible" being blatant code for "I got redpilled by Curtis." And Yarvin's claim to Milo that Thiel is "fully enlightened" speaks volumes. Nor is it as though these are new beliefs. The fact that Thiel started PayPal to create a "new world currency, free from all government control and dilution" is well-documented, and straightforwardly an Austrian School wet dream. And even before PayPal he was a right-wing ass, founding the conservative newspaper *The Stanford Review* at college with money from Irving Kristol and co-writing *The Diversity Myth*, an extended whine about how multiculturalism is an attack on western civilization that bluntly claims that works of literature by women and minorities generally aren't as good as the traditional western canon.

No, what's interesting isn't that Peter Thiel has a bunch of bog standard alt-right views. It isn't even that he's terrifyingly rich and spends a lot of money trying to bring his alt-right views to some sort of fruition. Rather, what's interesting is his approach to spending shitloads of money in general, both in terms of what he opts to spend it on and why, and how advancing the alt-right

cause fits in with, for example, Eliezer Yudkowsky, seasteading, and injecting the blood of teenagers in order to live forever.

Helpfully, this is the subject of Thiel's other book, *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*, compiled from lectures he gave at Stanford in 2012 (so well into his outright neoreactionary period) on entrepreneurship. Thiel's big idea in this book is a contrast between going "from zero to one," which is to say creating an entirely new idea, and going "from 1 to n," which is to say refining the idea. As the title (and indeed entire framing) suggests, Thiel proclaims himself to be interested in going from zero to one. Indeed, he presents this as a social and historical mandate. He complains:

> Between the First World War and Kissinger's trip to reopen relations with China in 1971, there was rapid technological development but not much globalization. Since 1971, we have seen rapid globalization along with limited technological development, mostly confined to IT

a point that's a dead ringer for his claim in his RNC speech:

> when I moved to Cleveland, defense research was laying the foundations for the internet. The Apollo program was just about to put a man on the moon–and it was Neil Armstrong, from right here in Ohio. The future felt limitless. But today our government is broken. Our nuclear bases still use floppy disks. Our newest fighter jets can't even fly in the rain. And it would be kind to say the government's software works poorly, because much of the time it doesn't even work at all. That is a staggering decline for the country that completed the Manhattan project.

Clearly Thiel's drive for zero to one innovation is inextricable from his politics. And you'd expect that. It's surely no coincidence, given his political influences, that *Zero to One* has a section towards the end about CEOs as kings that focuses particularly on Steve Jobs. Thiel's vision of corporate success is blatantly just the Moldbug/Land vision of how authoritarian capitalism will save us from the Great Filter. He even frames the choice as between acceleration and extinction. And this explains his predilection for unlikely moonshot investments, whether we're talking about MIRI or experimental scientific vampirism. He's backing wild ideas because wild ideas are where real innovation lies.

This isn't even that insane. I mean, I was praising the virtues of taking lizard people seriously just a few essays ago. But Thiel's approach to this crumbles under even mild scrutiny. Consider how he opens *Zero to One*, proclaiming that "every moment in business happens only once. The next Bill Gates will not build an operating system. The next Larry Page or Sergey Brin won't make a search engine. And the next Mark Zuckerberg won't create a social network. If you are copying these guys, you aren't learning from them." He transitions directly from this into introducing the 1 to n/zero to one distinction, thus clearly suggesting that the genius of these tech founders was that they went from zero to one. The problem, of course, is that none of them invented the things Thiel is crediting them with. Gates didn't even invent

DOS, little yet the operating system in general. The search engine had been around for, depending on your definitions, three to six years before Page and Brin started work on BackRub. And the concept of the social network literally predates the World Wide Web. So basically, Thiel's three main examples of going from zero to one are in fact people who went from 1 to n by copying other people.

And the contradictions keep coming—later in the book Thiel offers the idea of "last mover advantage," an inversion of the maxim that it's best to be the first person in a new market, saying that "it's much better to be the *last* mover—that is, to make the last great development in a specific market and enjoy years or even decades of monopoly profits." He's not wrong, of course—the actual inventors of the operating system, search engine, and social network, whatever point in their muddy early histories you want to pick as the "zero to one" moment—made nowhere near as much money as Gates, Page, Brin, and Zuckerberg. History is littered with inventors whose ideas were refined to profitability by other people, and very few of them were cut into those deals. No matter how much emphasis one puts on the "last great development" part, the fact remains that Thiel has just crafted a compelling case for aiming for n instead of one.

But Thiel's incoherence around this point reaches deeper, encompassing not only his notion of innovation but his notion of the contrarian. He boasts early in *Zero to One* that he likes to ask the question "what important truth do very few people agree with you on" in job interviews. Which, fine—it's no "would you rather fight one horse-sized duck or a hundred duck-sized horses," but it's a perfectly fine question as dumb tech interview questions go. And Thiel not unreasonably sneers at answers like "America is exceptional" or "there is no God," noting that these are in fact widely believed statements that are part of familiar debates. Thiel, unsurprisingly, craves radical answers—he devotes an entire chapter later in the book to the idea of secrets, i.e. little-known truths, making the contention that a successful business is built around a secret. And yet Thiel's suggestion of a contrarian thought is "most people think the future of the world will be defined by globalization, but the truth is that technology matters more." By which he means that going from zero to one is more important than going from 1 to n. This is, not to put too fine a point on it, fucking pathetic. It makes the exact same error that Thiel identifies in the bad answers he's given. The claim that technology is more important than globalization may be controversial, but coming from someone who made his billions in the late 90s tech book amidst waves of hype about how

computers would change the world the idea that this statement is one very few people agree with is preposterous.

Perhaps more to the point, however, Thiel's sense of contrarianism's value is clearly intensely selective. For instance, in the runup to the 2016 election he bemoaned the widespread condemnation of Trump voters, saying, "it surprises me that anyone would say that you're beyond the pale for taking the position that's held by half the country." Not only is this a statement that raises some major eyebrows when held up against, say, the Nazis, it's an absolutely gobsmacking claim coming from someone whose business ideology is based around looking for widely held truths to defy. But then, Thiel is prone to picking and choosing when his logic applies anyway. He decries the "18 months of insanity from September 1998 to March 2000" that was the dot-com boom and the spectacle of "paper millionaires," but then suggests that it makes total sense that Twitter should be valued at twelve times the market capitalization of the *New York Times* because even though it's losing money it has greater future profit potential, and that Hewlett-Packard's decline in value after the year 2000 was down to a failure to innovate as opposed to 2000 being when where Hewlett-Packard's entire industry went off a cliff. So the lessons of the dot-com bust are learnable, but only, it seems, when those lessons are ones Thiel actually wants to learn.

But given how consistently Thiel's reasoning is facile and selective, at some point the question stops being "where does Thiel get it wrong" and starts being "wait, is there actually anywhere Thiel gets it right?" And once this tipping point is reached, the situation unsurprisingly deteriorates quickly for Thiel. It's not just the sheer quantity of gobsmacking idiocies passages like his attempt to create a dichotomy between Marx and Shakespeare's models of conflict whereby Marx says people fight because they're different and Shakespeare thinks they fight because they're the same. (Marx in fact describes capitalists as "a band of warring brothers," and it's notable that Thiel's account of Shakespeare is based on literally nothing more than the first line of *Romeo and Juliet*, and leaves open the question of whether he's actually read any Shakespeare beyond that. Which is odd given how much hand-wringing he does in *The Diversity Myth* about how Shakespeare isn't taught anymore.) Rather, it's that once you're willing to question the basic fact of Thiel's competence it rapidly becomes apparent that the only actual evidence for this competence is that he has a lot of money.

But the sole reason for this money is that he was an initial investor in PayPal who was then persuaded to come onboard as CEO. But the company as he invested in it was, bluntly, an idiotic trainwreck. He admits in *Zero to One*

that its original product—a way of sending money between PalmPilots—was a non-starter, although he hedges that the problem was that "the world's millions of PalmPilot users weren't concentrated in a particular place, they had little in common, and they used their devices only episodically." None of this is wrong, per se, but it's spectacularly dancing around the fact that Palm was a comprehensively fucked company doomed by the fact that it went from zero to one and invented the iPhone before cellular Internet and touch screens were ready, and that literally everybody whose business model was based on Palm as a platform went down in flames. More to the point, however, his reason for helping found the company was that he "wanted to create a new internet currency to replace the U.S. dollar," a goal that PayPal never came anywhere close to realizing, and that was totally unrelated to why it was eventually successful, which was that Eric Jackson realized their product would let eBay sellers accept credit cards despite not having anything like the volume of transactions needed to make becoming a credit card processor sane. In other words, Thiel's entire fortune is built on the fact that someone else came up with an idea that salvaged his really dumb one.

And Thiel's subsequent career is frankly no more inspiring. It's not, after all, like any of his ostentatious moonshot investments have shown the slightest sign of paying off. MIRI should have been self-evident as a dumb idea with even a modicum of due diligence like "wait a moment, do any of you guys actually have experience making AIs?" Ambrosia, the "harvest the blood of teenagers" startup, is a classic patient-funded trial scam that played Thiel for millions with a bevy of staggeringly unjustified extrapolations from some old studies that were not so much about infusing the blood of the young as stitching an old mouse and a young mouse together so that they shared a circulatory system, an image that makes the "Peter Thiel is a vampire" jokes actually look tame in the horror monster sweepstakes. And his fascination with seasteading numbers him among the litany of people interested in micronations, which is such a rich vein of complete crackpottery that I'd hate to deprive you of the pleasure of Googling it. This borders on the investment portfolio you'd get if you gave David Icke several billion dollars.

The problem even afflicts his less overtly crazy investments. For instance, consider the much ballyhooed Thiel Fellowship, which made a media splash with its deliciously trolling approach of paying entrepreneurs not to go to college. The concept is not exactly a surprise given Thiel's long history of whining about the political biases of universities, but for all its ostentatious courting of controversy, it's resulted in nothing more than a stream of generic and mediocre startups, all of them sounding like the sorts of companies Thiel

lacerates in *Zero to One* when he snarks about there being a bunch of competing and near-identical credit card swiping plug-ins for mobile phones. "Social networking software for scientific innovations." "Wearable sensors for athletes." "An on-demand food delivery app for college kids." Good lord. The only one of any real note is Vitalik Buterin, co-creator of Ethereum, a cryptocurrency that you can run apps on. Readers interested in grasping the full scope of madness here should check out David Gerard's *Attack of the Fifty Foot Blockchain*, but suffice it to say that it's interesting in the same way Curtis Yarvin's Urbit is, which is to say that it's a very impressive solution to problems that no sane person will ever have. Nevertheless, it's a clear improvement on one of his earlier plans, which was basically to plow a bunch of money into solving the halting problem so he could mine Bitcoin faster. So at least the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

To be fair, it's not as though PayPal is the only thing Thiel has ever done that's worked. He founded another company, Palantir, that was valued at around $20 billion in late 2015, and whose success pretty firmly comes down to sound business strategies. The only problem is that these business strategies are more or less the exact opposite of everything Thiel ostensibly stands for. Palantir is just another big data analytics company of the sort that were springing up left and right at the time. Its profitability came because Thiel cannily attached himself to the defense contracting gravy train. But taking PayPal's fraud detection algorithms, which were the kind of thing loads of companies were building in 2004, and applying them to a new industry where the business model was "take advantage of the staggering amount of money the government wastes keeping the Army, Navy, and Air Force at equal levels regardless of need lest they start acting like squabbling children" is not only miles from "zero to one" creativity, it's rooted in taking advantage of everything libertarians nominally hate. Thiel's best idea, it seems, was ignoring all of his own advice.

So our puppetmaster stands revealed as yet another crackpot spinning a vast and compound web of bad ideas. Who would craft such a thing as the alt-right? Only a fucking idiot. What other answer were we possibly going to find? It's been idiots all the way down. And so of course even its billionaire supervillains bankrolling world-conquering AIs, vampiric life extension, and Donald Trump are idiots. This borders on "A is A." And yet for all its obviousness, it captures what is perhaps the key realization about the alt-right —one that's been implicit through much of this book, but is worth making explicit as we come to a close: they're stupid.

I do not suggest this to diminish their horror. Far from it: the essential horror of the abyss *is* stupidity. That's why it's an abyss. The unique and exquisite danger of stupidity is that by its nature, it is beyond reason. There is nothing that can be said to it, because by definition it wouldn't understand. It is an ur-basilisk—the one terrifying possibility that haunts every single argument that has ever been made. It is a move without response, playing by no rules other than its own, which do not generally include any obligation towards consistency. It is, in its way, the only approach that can never lose an argument. And in the alt-right and its affiliates we have one of the most staggeringly vast nexuses of raw stupidity the world has ever crafted.

To be clear, my contention is not merely that the alt-right is stupid, nor even that its individual adherents are. It is and they are, but the problem is more fundamental: the alt-right is stupidity. It's the elemental particle of which every part is comprised. To engage in alt-right thinking is to turn one's self into a vacuous skinsuit animated by raw stupidity. There is literally not a single shred of non-stupidity in the entire thing. Mencius Moldbug? Stupid. Milo Yiannopoulos? Stupid. Donald Trump? Peter Thiel? Vox Day? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Neoreaction is stupid. Race realism is stupid. Austrian economics is stupid. #MAGA and Pepe and the Daily Stormer are stupid. Even Nick Land is only not stupid to the precise extent to which there is a possibility that what he's doing is some elaborate game, and frankly, even that sounds pretty stupid once you say it out loud. Every single detail of every single aspect of this entire cratering shitstorm in which the human race seems hell-bent on going extinct is absolutely fucking stupid.

Nothing follows from this. In all likelihood, literally. We cannot define ourselves in contrast to this tendency and move on because to do so is still to build on a foundation of abyssal stupidity. The event horizon has been breached. There's no longer an outside. A thing cannot be unknown. The only solution is to never encounter these ideas in the first place. Don't look now; it's too late.

Appendix: Guided by the Beauty of Their Weapons: An Analysis of Theodore Beale and His Supporters

The first version of "Guided by the Beauty of Their Weapons" was published on my blog in April of 2015, during Hugo voting season, and served in part as a call to arms within the larger Sad Puppies controversy. What follows is a heavily revised version for a now out of print essay collection. Although its tone and approach differ from much of this collection, it was an important precursor to this work, and it seemed prudent to gather all my writing on the alt-right under one umbrella.

Part One: How the Hugos Got Hijacked

For decades, the Hugo Awards have been one of the leading awards in science fiction. In many ways they are a living history of science fiction and fantasy. In the 1950s, when they were established, they went to writers like Alfred Bester and Arthur C. Clarke; in the 60s, to classics like "Flowers for Algernon," *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Later in the decade, as the new wave of science fiction broke upon the genre, winners included writers like Harlan Ellison, who won three in four years for " 'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman," "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," and "The Beast that Shouted Love at the Heart of the World," before transitioning into the 70s by highlighting writers like Samuel R. Delany and Ursula K. LeGuin. In the 80s they honored the birth of cyberpunk in *Neuromancer*, along with classics like David Brin's *Startide Rising* and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*; in the 90s it was writers like Neal Stephenson, Connie Willis, and Kim Stanley Robinson; more recently, China Miéville, Neil Gaiman, Michael Chabon, and John Scalzi. I include this litany simply to

highlight a very basic and important point—the Hugos have, historically, been that rarest of things: a genuinely good award that reliably pointed towards books and stories worth reading.

In 2015, however, the Hugo nomination process was effectively taken over by two related groups who employed a controversial set of tactics that were legal but had not previously been employed in the over sixty-year history of the Hugo Awards due to generally being considered unsporting and in poor taste.

Hugo nominations are a fairly simple affair. You join the World Science Fiction Convention (in 2015 called Sasquan, and held in Spokane) for the year, either as a fully attending member or as a non-attending "supporting member" (which cost $40 in 2015). This entitles you to submit a nominating ballot for the Hugos, in which you can nominate up to five works in each category. The five eligible works in each category with the most nominations become the nominees, at which point voting happens.

Because the overwhelming majority of Hugo nominators simply pick their personal favorite five (or fewer) works in each category, this system is easily gameable with a small amount of organization, which is what happened in 2015, when Brad Torgersen and Theodore Beale (also known under the pen name of Vox Day) each released recommendation lists that included four and five nominees in most categories and called on people to submit their exact proposed slates. Torgersen's slate was called the Sad Puppies, while Beale's was called the Rabid Puppies. The result was a large number of identical and near-identical ballots, which meant that the works on those ballots had more nominations than anything submitted by fans who simply picked their personal favorites, and who, despite dramatically outnumbering the Puppies, split their vote among a couple dozen options, none of which got as many as the more disciplined Puppy slates.

Specifically, it was Theodore Beale's slate that dominated—in the initially released set of nominations, the nominees in Best Novella, Best Novelette, Best Short Story, Best Related Work, Best Editor (Long Form), and Best Editor (Short Form) were simply the Rabid Puppies slate, verbatim. All told, 58 of the 67 items on the Rabid Puppies slate were nominated, roughly two-thirds of the final ballot. (Subsequently, two works were disqualified, including one of the Best Novelette options, with the replacement work in that case not being from the Puppy slates, and two nominees belatedly rejected their nomination, including one of the Short Story nominees.)

Relatively unreported—and indeed misreported in most coverage of this—is the fact that the Sad Puppies largely failed. The two slates had heavy overlap,

but ten works that were on the Rabid Puppies slate and not the Sad Puppies were ultimately nominated, compared to only three that were Sad but not Rabid. More to the point, two of those three were in the category of Best Semiprozine, a category in which Beale only proposed one nominee, meaning that there was only one instance of a Sad Puppy beating out a Rabid Puppy to a place on the ballot, compared to three Rabid Puppies that made the list over a Sad one. In the only category in which both Beale and Torgersen proposed full slates, Best Short Story, Beale's nominees made it.

This last fact is particularly relevant, because the Sad and Rabid Puppies, though obviously related, have distinct agendas.

Part Two: What Puppies Want

Let's start here with the Sad Puppies, as, although they are in practice the less important of the two slates, they are the older, and their history is necessary to understand the Rabid Puppies. This is the third iteration of the Sad Puppies movement, which, in its first two years, was organized by Larry Correia, a writer best known for his *Monster Hunter* series, which combines action-packed thrills with lovingly detailed descriptions of gunplay. The first Sad Puppies campaign was simply to get his 2012 novel *Monster Hunter Legion* nominated, which Correia framed as a reaction against "message fic" and in favor of "unabashed pulp action" that would upset the "literati." (The name Sad Puppies is a swipe at what Correia perceived as the overly emotional quality of much of what was nominated, which he compared to emotive SPCA videos about animals living in poor conditions.)

This effort failed, but Correia tried again in 2014, this time proposing not just his own novel *Warbound* (Book Three of the *Grimnoir Chronicles*) but nine other nominees across seven categories. This time the bulk of Correia's nominations made the ballot, including, in the category of Best Novelette, a story called "Opera Vita Aeterna" by Vox Day, the aforementioned pen name of Theodore Beale.

This was, to say the least, a Faustian bargain. We will come to the comprehensive awfulness of Beale shortly, but suffice it to say that he is a tremendously controversial figure whose inclusion on the ballot was taken as the slap in the face Correia no doubt intended it to be. This, however, ended up being counterproductive for Correia, with his nominees coming in last in every category save for Best Novelette, where "Opera Vita Aeterna" was beaten by No Award, a peculiarity of the Hugo voting system that will take a more central role later in the story.

This led to 2015, when the Sad Puppies slate was handed off to Brad Torgersen, who offered sixty nominees, with options in every category. Three days after unveiling his slate of nominees, Torgersen wrote an essay on his blog explaining the necessity of the slate in terms of the "unreliability" of contemporary science fiction:

> A few decades ago, if you saw a lovely spaceship on a book cover, with a gorgeous planet in the background, you could be pretty sure you were going to get a rousing space adventure featuring starships and distant, amazing worlds. If you saw a barbarian swinging an axe? You were going to get a rousing fantasy epic with broad-chested heroes who slay monsters, and run off with beautiful women. Battle-armored interstellar jump troops shooting up alien invaders? Yup. A gritty military SF war story, where the humans defeat the odds and save the Earth. And so on, and so forth.
>
> These days, you can't be sure.
>
> The book has a spaceship on the cover, but is it really going to be a story about space exploration and pioneering derring-do? Or is the story merely about racial prejudice and exploitation, with interplanetary or interstellar trappings?
>
> There's a sword-swinger on the cover, but is it really about knights battling dragons? Or are the dragons suddenly the good guys, and the sword-swingers are the oppressive colonizers of Dragon Land?
>
> A planet, framed by a galactic backdrop. Could it be an actual bona fide space opera? Heroes and princesses and laser blasters? No, wait. It's about sexism and the oppression of women.
>
> Finally, a book with a painting of a person wearing a mechanized suit of armor! Holding a rifle! War story ahoy! Nope, wait. It's actually about gay and transgender issues.
>
> Or it could be about the evils of capitalism and the despotism of the wealthy.
>
> Do you see what I am trying to say here?

There are several things worth noting here. First and most obvious is the spectacle of a grown man complaining about how he just can't judge a book by its cover anymore. Second, and hardly something that Torgersen has tried to hide, is the basic political aspect to this complaint. Observe the list of things that Torgersen does not want addressed in his science fiction: racial prejudice and exploitation, sexism and the oppression of women, gay and transgender issues, the evils of capitalism, and the despotism of the wealthy. (This had always been part of the Sad Puppies narrative—in the first year, for instance, Correia mused, "just imagine with me… Should I vote for the heavy handed message fic about the dangers of fracking and global warming and dying polar bears and robot rape as a bad feminist analogy with a villain who is a thinly veiled Dick Cheney? Or should I vote for the LAS VEGAS EXPLOSION SHOOTING EVERYTHING DRAGON HELICOPTER

CHASE ORC SACRIFICING CHICKENS BOOK!?! Grglglgggggslllll……*BOOM!"*)

Obviously, as histories of science fiction literature go, this is not exactly the most accurate: it's hardly the case that the science fiction of the 1960s-80s (the period Torgersen highlights as the sort of authentic science fiction that doesn't get Hugo nominations anymore) was not largely about these exact issues. A perusal of the Hugo winners over those decades will reveal wins for Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, a book about sexual freedom and prejudice; Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, an early and major work of feminist science fiction; Isaac Asimov's *The Gods Themselves*, which features an alien race with three genders, all of which must participate in sexual reproduction; two wins for Octavia Butler, whose work is massively focused on race and gender issues… we could continue like this for a long time. The idea that science fiction, in the sense that the Hugo Awards have ever cared about it, is an apolitical genre of thrilling adventure fiction is simply not supported by any sort of historical reality.

And, of course, there's another obvious point to make, which is that it's not the 1980s anymore, and hasn't been for more than a quarter-century now. The suggestion that any genre ought to resist evolution and development over the course of twenty-five years is a strange one; to make the claim about a genre ostensibly about the future is even stranger. Simply put, ideas get old and played out, and art requires people to come up with new ones to maintain a sense of freshness. This in particular is a point we will return to.

I explain all of this simply to suggest that Brad Torgersen, whatever his merits may be in any other arena in which he may be judged, is an absolutely terrible critic of science fiction. It will not surprise anybody—and this too is a point we will return to in some detail—that he has terrible taste in science fiction as well.

But as we've seen, it's not really Torgersen who is most important here; it's Theodore Beale. Although we shouldn't treat these as unrelated matters. The Rabid Puppies were the slate that actually dominated the Hugos nominations, but the Sad Puppies give every appearance of having been actively constructed to allow them to. In five of the six categories swept by Rabid Puppies, the Sad Puppies slate consisted of fewer than five nominations, with Beale's slate simply taking the Sad Puppies and adding some of his own selections, in virtually every case things published by his own small press, Castalia House, or, in the two Best Editor categories, simply for himself outright.

This raises the very obvious question: to what extent did Torgersen and Beale collaborate in developing their parallel slates? The answer would appear

to be "significantly." The process for selecting the Sad Puppies in 2015 was fairly opaque—Torgersen took recommendations from his blog's readers, but the bulk of the slate did not come from those recommendations, and instead seem to have been selected by Torgersen in the course of private conversations. Indeed, Correia has said that the 2015 slate, although managed by Torgersen, was chosen by the "Evil League of Evil," a name coined by John C. Wright (in mockery of the degree to which they had been criticized in the past) to refer to the collective grouping of Correia, Beale, himself, and a few other writers. Correia and Torgersen have been open that they've been in frequent communication with Beale. And Beale, launching his slate the day after Torgersen's, had a logo from the same artist who drew the Sad Puppies 3 logo featuring the same cartoon dogs.

Despite the strong evidence that Beale was involved throughout the Sad Puppies process, once the extent of the damage wrought by the Puppies was clear both Torgersen and Correia took pains to distance themselves from the increasingly radioactive Beale. The general tone of both of their efforts was the same—pointing out that they don't agree with Beale on everything, and that they can't control him. (I don't doubt this; Beale is a self-identified rabid dog, after all, and there's a reason there's a generally agreed upon course of treatment for one.) But there is a telling moment in Correia's apologia, in which he said, "Look at it like this. I'm Churchill. Brad is FDR. We wound up on the same side as Stalin."

There are two things to say about this. The first is, "Wait, if you're Churchill, Torgersen is FDR, and Beale is Stalin, then in this analogy, the people who thought the Hugo Awards were fine the way they were are…" The second is somewhat less glib: how, exactly, did anyone "wind up" here? One does not simply "wind up" allied to Josef Stalin. This is a process that requires some effort. It is a process during which one is afforded many opportunities to stop and say, "Wait a moment, I seem to be allying with Josef Stalin, maybe I should reconsider my life choices."

And this is particularly rich coming from Correia, who is, recall, the person who brought Beale into the issue by deciding to include him in the second Sad Puppies slate in the first place. And it's not hard to see why he did this—Beale has a dedicated and organized group of supporters who will follow his orders and recommendations with minimal question. This is exactly the sort of thing you need if you want to exploit the weaknesses of the Hugo nominating system. But like any deal with the devil, it got away from Correia, who in effect lost control of his own movement to Beale, such that the Sad Puppies became little more than a bunch of moderate collaborators.

As for Beale's movement, one thing you can definitely say about him is this: he's not shy about his views. He opens his Rabid Puppies slate by explicitly declaring what is only implicit in Torgersen's slate: that this is about politics. "We of the science fiction Right do not march in lockstep or agree on everything," his post begins, making clear from the outset that the purpose of the slate is to get a more right-wing set of Hugo nominations.

Similarly, he is blunter than Torgersen about how he would like people to use their Hugo ballots. Torgersen makes much of empowering fans, saying that the slate "is a recommendation. Not an absolute," and stressing that "YOU get to have a say in who is acknowledged." Beale, on the other hand, discourages his readers from exercising any personal preference, saying of his recommendations, "I encourage those who value my opinion on matters related to science fiction and fantasy to nominate them precisely as they are."

But this begs the question of what Theodore Beale's opinions on matters related to science fiction and fantasy are. And, given that these opinions are seemingly inextricably related to his particular right-wing politics, it's worth unpacking those as well.

This is going to be ugly, I'm afraid.

Part Three: The Unbelievable Noxiousness of Theodore Beale

Theodore Beale is a neo-fascist. Like most neo-fascists, he is not fond of this characterization, although the degree to which anyone should care about this is at best debatable. But perhaps the most astonishing thing about Theodore Beale is that his fascism is not actually the most loathsome thing about him.

Most accounts of his awfulness—and there are many—focus on a core set of beliefs on his part, namely his views on gender, race, and LGBT issues. These are merely a small portion of the overall picture of him, but nevertheless, it's not hard to see why they stick out for people, and it's worth taking a brief tour of his remarks on these subjects.

In an essay called "Why Women's Rights are Wrong," he came out against women's suffrage, saying, "The women of America would do well to consider whether their much-cherished gains of the right to vote, work, murder and freely fornicate are worth destroying marriage, children, civilized Western society and little girls." He has repeatedly reiterated this basic conclusion, which, to be fair, is basically the title of his essay restated. Elsewhere, he spoke in favor of acid attacks on feminists, saying that "a few acid-burned faces is a small price to pay for lasting marriages." He has also said, in a quote that really requires very little framing, "In light of the strong correlation between female

education and demographic decline, a purely empirical perspective on Malala Yousafzai, the poster girl for global female education, may indicate that the Taliban's attempt to silence her was perfectly rational and scientifically justifiable."

He is an avowed supporter of Roosh V, a man who literally makes his living selling instruction books on how to rape women, and runs a secondary blog aimed at the pickup artist crowd where he routinely makes astonishing claims like that women who get tattoos are enemies of western civilization.

In terms of race, when talking about the black science fiction writer NK Jemisin, he proclaimed her to be a "half savage" and that "genetic science presently suggests that we are not equally homo sapiens sapiens," while insisting that this didn't mean that he didn't think she was human—just, apparently, subhuman. Not that he'd ever be so crass as to use the word. Elsewhere he has said, "It is absurd to imagine that there is absolutely no link between race and intelligence," making it clear that he thinks that people of African descent are less intelligent than white people, as well as being more violent. He is a classic proponent of the age-old practice of scientific racism, which was, just to point out, one of the intellectual pillars of National Socialist ideology. His blunt claim is that racial diversity in a geographic area automatically leads to war, and that immigration is a form of invasion.

Finally, he has proclaimed that "homosexuality is a birth defect from every relevant secular, material, and sociological perspective," in the course of arguing for the validity of conversion therapy, a practice that is, in point of material fact, directly correlated with increased suicide rates among its patients compared with populations who are allowed to freely express their sexualities with other consenting adults.

These are merely the most horrifying highlights of a lengthy career of saying absolutely appalling things. The rabbit hole stretches down at length—his blog spans more than a decade of proclamations along these lines. But these quotes are, I think, sufficient to establish the degree of awfulness. The main point is that when Beale is described as sexist, racist, and homophobic, these terms are not used to describe the sorts of views that lurk within mainstream discourse—the "I wouldn't want my daughter to date one" sort of racist, if you will. These are views so gobsmackingly outside of the realm of what it is socially acceptable to think and say in 2015 that it is impossible to imagine them getting aired in any major newspaper. Fox News wouldn't touch them. The Republican Party would demand the resignation of any elected official who said them. It is difficult to imagine any area where such views could openly hold major sway.

But in some ways the toxicity of his views is not actually the most striking thing about him. What's really striking is that he's just an astonishingly mean and nasty person. He's the sort of person who responds to someone leaving a bad review of his book on Amazon by crawling through their personal history and then writing a blog post naming them and publicly discussing their history of mental health issues and suicide attempts. He is the sort of person who responds to spam commenters on his blog by publishing their home address. He is a sadist, and moreover the sort of sadist who relishes his cruelty and puts effort into it, seeking to hurt his victims as thoroughly as possible.

And this attitude carries over elsewhere. Consider, for instance, his explanation for the Rabid Puppies slate: "I did not game the 2014 Hugo Awards. After being falsely accused of doing so by numerous parties, I decided to demonstrate the absurdity of the accusation by gaming the 2015 Awards. I trust my innocence with regards to the 2014 Awards is now clear and I look forward to receiving apologies from those who falsely accused me." He makes no bones about the fact that his primary motivation in engaging with the Hugos is simply spite over the fact that "Opera Vita Aeterna" came in below No Award in 2014, and that his goal is to disrupt and damage them.

So Beale is a sexist, racist, homophobic extremist and a jerk to boot. I said neo-fascist, however, and that's a different fish to fry, and one that's going to require a brief jaunt into the nature of fascism. For now, let's stick to a couple simple claims about Beale's positions—claims that may not initially seem to have implications that are anything like his coming out in favor of the Taliban's attack on Malala Yousafzai, but that we'll get around to untangling. Specifically, Beale explicitly identifies with the neoreactionary movement, and describes himself as a Christian dominionist. To anyone familiar with the contemporary landscape of far-right extremism, this is likely description enough. For anyone else, however, let's unpack this.

Part Four: On Fascism

I mentioned at the outset that this was not going to be a piece that made much of an effort to convince fascists not to be fascists. Here this becomes particularly important. I am not going to bother trying to refute all or even most of the many arguments that Theodore Beale has made for his positions. I am assuming, at this point, that you, as a reader, are in no way on the fence about fascism, that it is not a viewpoint you are seriously considering, and that you are appalled at Theodore Beale's beliefs and disturbed by the fact that he has influenced a major and historic literary award.

Therefore, let's not engage Beale on his own terms. The easiest mistake to make when trying to understand fascists is to think that they are best described in terms of a philosophy—as though fascism is a set of tenets and beliefs. This is a mistake that largely benefits fascists, who are generally disinclined to actually call themselves fascists, since they recognize that, much like "Nazis," it's not exactly a label that does a great sales job. On top of that, fascists have a remarkably well-developed vocabulary of jargon and a propensity for verbose arguments that puts me to shame. What this means is that if you attempt to get into some sort of practical, content-based argument with a fascist, you will suddenly find yourself staring down a thirty item bulleted list with frequent citations to barely relevant and inaccurately described historical events, which, should you fail to address even one sub-point, you will be declared to have lost the debate by the fascist and the mob of a dozen people on Twitter who suddenly popped up the moment you started arguing with him. (And it's always a him.)

In other words, this is manifestly neither a refutation of Beale's positions nor of fascism in general. Rather, it's an attempt to understand the intellectual traditions Beale follows, both explicitly and implicitly.

As a term, "fascism" is admittedly one whose definitions have become exceedingly broad. There are, these days, few adherents to the early 20th century fascist movements headed by Benito Mussolini and Francisco Franco in Italy and Spain, for instance. These days we mostly talk about "neo-fascism," much like we talk about "neo-nazism," a heavily overlapping ideology that Beale can also pretty fairly be characterized as subscribing to. Even these are broad terms, often used to describe any extremist right-wing position with an authoritarian or racist streak, definitions that Beale unambiguously qualifies under.

For my part, I'm inclined towards Umberto Eco's definition in his essay "Ur-Fascism," based in no small part on his own experiences growing up in fascist Italy, but broadened to describe subsequent movements with similar ideologies. Eco was in particular fascinated by the ability of fascism to espouse a sort of revolutionary totalitarianism that simultaneously supported (and was financed by) existing structures of power while offering populist rhetoric about the looming new order.

In light of this, Eco offers a list of fourteen characteristics of Ur-Fascism, noting that "these features cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism, but it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it." In the case of the Puppy movements, however, there are

far more than just one. Eco's list is as follows, although anyone interested in an extended definition of any ought to consult the original essay.

1. The cult of tradition.
2. The rejection of modernism.
3. Action for action's sake.
4. Hostility to analytic criticism.
5. Fear of difference.
6. The appeal to a frustrated middle class.
7. Obsession with a plot (specifically an external plot; other writers describe this as the "stab in the back myth.")
8. Focus on the "ostentatious wealth and force" of its enemies.
9. A permanent state of war.
10. Contempt for the weak.
11. A cult of heroism espousing a noble sacrifice.
12. A focus on machismo.
13. A selective (and undemocratic) populism.
14. The use of Newspeak.

By my count, Beale and the Puppies tick the overwhelming majority of these boxes; the only one I can't really find in them is the cult of heroism (and even that appears in much of the military SF they admire). The cult of tradition is obvious enough: it's the entire basis of Brad Torgersen's lament about book covers. The rejection of modernism is perhaps subtler, but is clear in Correia's distinction between classic pulp adventure and the "literati," by which he means work following in the new wave tradition that emerged in the 1960s with heavy influence from the formal experimentalism of early 20th century modernism. Correia's use of "literati" also echoes many of the phrases Eco uses in describing the third point such as "degenerate intellectuals" and "eggheads," a point that also fairly neatly covers "hostility to analytic criticism."

It is perhaps too easy to argue the case for fear of difference, given Beale's impassioned racism and sexism. But it is worth emphasizing this point simply because of its sheer importance to Beale. Few topics animate him more than immigration and the horrors of diversity. He repeats the statement that "diversity + proximity = war" like a personal mantra, a fact made all the more ironic by the small detail that he repeatedly describes himself of being of Mexican and Native American heritage, and yet lives in Italy as an immigrant.

Moving on to the appeal to the frustrated middle class we are brought once again to Torgersen's bizarre essay about book covers, which is framed almost entirely in these terms. It is an appeal to a middlebrow crowd of readers who nominally feel left behind by current trends in science fiction. But one might also locate it in the Gamergate movement, which Beale is also heavily involved

in, and which also frames itself as a consumer revolt among largely middle class geeks.

Both also demonstrate an obsession with a plot. A key component of the Puppies' narrative is the idea that the Hugos have, in recent years, fallen into the hands of a mysterious cabal interested only in leftist message fiction. The specific contours of this cabal are endlessly fuzzy, based on nebulous accusations of vote trading and collusion that somehow got things hundreds of nominations despite leaving no clear evidence of campaigning (the closest anyone has found are a few people noting that they have eligible work, which is a far cry from the Puppies' organized campaign to control the entire ballot), but that is, of course, the point of these nebulous plots.

The characterization of this cabal also nicely fits the criteria of point eight, which Eco frames in terms of "a constant shifting of rhetorical focus" such that "the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak." For all that Beale's narrative relies on the idea that there's a cabal in control of nearly all major publishing houses, the entire mainstream media, and, of course, the actual Hugo Awards, his descriptions of his enemies always focus on making them pathetic and weak. Beale's treatment of Teresa Nielsen Hayden, an editor at Tor Books (a company generally labeled as the enemy by the Puppies) is indicative—on the one hand she, along with her husband, are treated as powerful puppetmasters within science fiction. On the other, Beale refers to her constantly as "the Toad of Tor" and makes fun of her weight. (That also largely checks off "contempt for the weak.")

The idea of life as permanent warfare, meanwhile, is absolutely central to Beale's ideology and rhetoric. For Beale the struggle over the Hugo Awards (or, for that matter, video games) is nothing less than a battle for the very soul of Western Civilization, which is under constant attack in the modern day. Beale talks endlessly of "4GW," or fourth-generation warfare, a mode of modern, decentralized warfare carried out as much in the media as on conventional battlefields.

This militarism also points towards machismo, and indeed Beale readily displays what Eco describes as "disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality." But this tendency goes far deeper: it's visible in Correia's initial formulation of the Puppies in terms of excessive emotion, for instance, clearly a suggestion that such science fiction is insufficiently manly. Perhaps its most blatant expression, however, is unsurprisingly Beale's in his division of "Blue SF and Pink SF." No points for guessing which one is good.

This leaves only selective populism and Newspeak. Both are relatively straightforward cases. The selective populism of the Puppies is baked into the entire system. Indeed, it's the central paradox of their entire argument. Their justification is that the action-heavy pulp science fiction they espouse is more popular than the stuff that Hugo voters have actually been voting for. The entire argument is that Torgersen and Beale are single-handedly proclaiming the true popular taste. (And indeed, Eco writes at length about the way in which this populism is always hostile to a real democracy such as the Hugos.)

As for Newspeak, one need only look at the myriad of jargon terms and mantras spun by Beale and Torgersen. Indeed, Torgersen specifically coined the term "CHORF" (Cliquish Holier-than-thou Obnoxious Reactionary Fanatics, apparently) as an insult to throw at his political enemies at the start of the Sad Puppies campaign. Beale, meanwhile, is awash with slogans that he repeats endlessly: "Diversity + Proximity = War," for instance, or "SJWs always lie." Or, for that matter, things like "Blue" and "Pink" SF. To affiliate one's self with the Puppies is very much a matter of learning to speak like them and repeat their platitudes.

So that's thirteen out of fourteen markers displayed by Beale and the Puppies—a tally that would seem to put the question of whether they can fairly be described as "fascist" beyond any real contention. All the same, it is worth exploring the ideas of Christian dominionism and neoreactionaries, so as to get a firm idea of Beale's precise flavor of fascism.

Christian dominionism is a simple enough idea—it's a strand of Christian theocracy, generally associated with American Protestants, and reasonably characterized by Beale's statement, "I believe that any civilized Western society will be a Christian one or it will cease to be civilized... if it manages to survive at all." (Note that "if it manages to survive at all" displays one of the key characteristics of dominionists, namely their apocalyptic bent.) And it's a strand of thought Beale has long-time affiliations with: his father, the jailed tax protester Robert Beale, worked for Pat Robertson's 1988 Presidential campaign; Beale got his start in publishing with a series of apocalyptic Christian novels under his own name. (Robertson, fittingly, is namechecked by Eco in explaining the obsession with a plot.)

Neoreactionarism, on the other hand, is a newer school of thought also known as the Dark Enlightenment. This is a strange school of thought that combines an intense cultural conservatism with an extreme and tech culture-inspired libertarian streak. In its view, the enlightenment and liberal democracy ("pseudo-democracy," in Beale's parlance) were a disastrous wrong turn away from monarchic, aristocratic, and feudalist forms of government, an error

maintained by the all-encompassing Cathedral (essentially a distributed and leaderless conspiracy that constitutes the general consensus that democracy and human rights are good ideas). It believes that a return to monarchy is necessary—an overtly capitalist dictatorship in which king and CEO become, in effect, the same thing, guiding the citizenship (who have no rights save the right to leave, not that, in this line of thought, there's anywhere to go) through cold, impersonal, and very specifically masculine reason with the sole point of increasing the profitability of the state. It's spectacularly disturbing, and deserves to be the subject of another book entirely, which, to be fair, I'm writing.

Part Five: Trolling the Voice of God

Having identified Beale's beliefs, let us try to understand their consequences. To this end, let's look at one of Beale's picks for the Best Related Work category, a book called *Transhuman and Subhuman: Essays on Science Fiction and Awful Truth*, by John C. Wright, who Beale recommended for a staggering six nominations, including three of the five slots in Best Novella (a category where four of the five works are published by Beale's micro-publisher Castalia House). Beale has described Wright as "one of the true grandmasters of science fiction," and Wright shares both the bulk of Beale's politics and his propensity for being a jerk. Which makes this book particularly useful, as it is largely Wright's thoughts on how science fiction and fantasy ought to be.

The title essay of Wright's collection gets off to a suitably fascist start, proclaiming that "anyone who does not sense or suspect that modernity is missing something, something important that once we had and now is lost, has no heart for High Fantasy and no taste for it." He goes on to praise high fantasy as a genre with "a healthy view of the universe," a view characterized by three tenets: "(1) truth is true, (2) goodness is good, and (3) life is beautiful unless marred by sin and malice."

So right off the bat we have a vision of the world based on a nostalgic and lost golden age (always a fertile breeding ground for fascism), and one with a sense of absolute authority that is clearly rooted in Christian theology. And he goes on to nail this down, describing "four stages of a path of decay towards the nihilist abyss" and proceeding to list science fiction writers who epitomize each stage. (Of particular note is his attack on Ursula K. Le Guin, who he faults for the way in which her works feature "a hidden truth, a truth that cannot be made clear," or, perhaps more bluntly, because she works in metaphor.) In contrast stands a Christian view of magic (which Wright also, and not entirely unreasonably, argues is the purview of science fiction) where

"there is an authority, a divine and loving Father who has both the natural authority of a parent and of a creator and of a king."

At this point Wright transitions to his nominal subject, the idea of transhumanism, rejecting it because the fundamental inescapability of sin means that humans cannot create perfect people, and that anything they did create would be inhuman, proclaiming that "creatures without souls but with intellects capable of free will are devils."

There is, for all of this, relatively little to actually argue with Wright about. He spends four thousand words, in effect, arguing that from a Christian perspective, science fiction and fantasy should be consistent with Christian beliefs—Christian beliefs he describes in an avuncularly pompous tone borrowed from Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. It's aggressively tautological, to say the least. So let's instead simply poke at this as an aesthetic, that being the sense in which we are most interested in it anyway. Especially because the words he uses to discuss transhumanism are so evocative: "subhuman." "Devils."

This is not the first time in the course of this discussion that we have encountered the idea of subhumanity. We've already seen Beale call a black woman less human than he is. And his other description of her, "half-savage," is similarly in the same rhetorical sphere as Wright's descriptions of transhumanism, specifically the word "devil," which carries not just theological weight, but the weight of a long history of racist imperialism, in which the colonized subjects were dismissed as "devils" by their white conquerors. (For example, Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" describes "Your new-caught, sullen peoples, Half-devil and half-child.")

I am, I suspect, hammering the point home for most readers at this point, but I nevertheless want to make it explicit what I am suggesting: if you got John C. Wright drunk at the bar, you could get him to admit that he thinks transhumanism and black people are ugly for the same reason. And if you couldn't get John C. Wright to say it, you sure as hell could get Theodore Beale to.

Given this, I think it is not unreasonable to explore the intellectual possibilities of staking out positions that are as close to diametrically opposite Theodore Beale's as possible. If he proclaims himself the voice of god, it seems to me an honor to serve as his Devil. It is, I am told, traditional to quote scripture for my purpose. To wit, then, Wright describes the Occultist, the third stage in the path of decay towards nihilism:

> I don't mean the word Occultist here to mean a palmist armed with Tarot cards. I am using the word in its original sense. I mean it is one who believes in a hidden reality, a hidden truth, a truth that cannot be made clear.

> In the modern world, the Occultist is more likely to select Evolution or the Life-Force as this occult object of reverence, rather than the Tao. Occultists, in the sense I am using the word, explicitly denounce no religion nor way of life except the religion of Abraham, whose God is jealous and does not permit the belief in many gods, nor the belief in many views of the world each no better than the next.
>
> Postmodernism, which rejects the concept of one overarching explanation for reality, is explicitly Occultic: the truth is hidden and never can be known.
>
> Occultists tend to be more wary of the progress of science and technology than Cultists or Worldlies. They see the drawbacks, the danger to the environment, and the psychological danger of treating the world as a mere resource to be exploited, rather than as living thing, or a sacred thing.
>
> The Occultists believe in undemanding virtues, such as tolerance and a certain civic duty, but even these are relative and partial. There is beauty in his world, indeed, the beauty of nature is often his only approach to the supernal, but that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and there is no absolute truth and very little goodness aside from good manners and political correctness.

As a PhD in English with no small amount of training in postmodernism and the recent publisher of a book that proclaimed itself "An Occultism of *Doctor Who*," (reprinted in full later in this volume) I feel some qualification to speak here, secure in my conviction that John C. Wright and Theodore Beale recognize me as exactly what I am.

Where Wright is simply mistaken is the third paragraph quoted, in which he equates postmodernism with the occult. It is not, to be clear, that this is an unfair equation, although the occult is not necessarily postmodern (Aleister Crowley, for instance, is an arch-modernist) nor is the postmodern necessarily occult (indeed, very little of postmodernism can be accurately described as "explicitly Occultic"). Rather, it is the equivalence of the statement "there is no single overarching explanation for reality" with the statement "the truth is hidden and never can be known." This is, simply put, false, and the reasons ought be self-evident with only a moment's thought. The problem is the belief that "single overarching explanation for reality" and "truth" are inherently synonyms, a viewpoint that excludes the perfectly sensible possibility that there are multiple reasonable explanations for reality floating, all of which are, if not true, at least seemingly good enough to use without causing any major problems that we can see, and that doesn't even necessarily mean that there isn't such a thing as a single true explanation that is right in all regards, it just means that any such explanation is something well beyond our current understanding of the universe, and probably not relevant to very many practical situations.

But perhaps the more interesting, and certainly the more extraordinary consequence of this seemingly benign observation is the fact that John C.

Wright believes that he has access to the singular truth of reality's basic nature. And, perhaps even more extraordinarily, this fundamental truth about reality, this voice of god that he claims to hear (and he does explain his beliefs in part in terms of a religious experience) is telling him that it is the Divine Will that he get people to understand that *The Legend of Korra* is really rubbish. (No, really. He told the creators of that children's cartoon that they "are disgusting, limp, soulless sacks of filth. You have earned the contempt and hatred of all decent human beings forever, and we will do all we can to smash the filthy phallic idol of sodomy you bow and serve and worship. Contempt, because you struck from behind, cravenly; and hatred, because you serve a cloud of morally-retarded mental smog called Political Correctness, which is another word for hating everything good and bright and decent and sane in life." And, of course, note that evocative phrase: "you struck from behind, cravenly." Recall the "stab-in-the-back" myth and its relationship to fascism.)

But why talk about a man who only hears the voice of god when we have the self-proclaimed Vox Day himself, Theodore Beale. Let us simply delve into some of the verbiage this self-appointed god has spewed forth to the world. To start, his interview with John Brown, where he clarified his views on race and intelligence in helpful depth, and specifically his claim that black people are less human than others. He says:

> My response to those who claim I am racist or misogynist is simple: why do you reject science, history, and logic? It is not hateful to be scientifically literate, historically aware, and logically correct.
>
> Pure Homo sapiens sapiens lack Homo neanderthalus and Homo denisova genes which appear to have modestly increased the base genetic potential for intelligence. These genetic differences may explain the observed IQ gap between various human population groups as well as various differences in average brain weights and skull sizes.
>
> Yes, East Asians have been observed to have considerably higher IQs than Southeast Asians.
>
> The Chinese. Their average IQ is higher than the Ashkenazi Jews, who are genetically a refined group of Semitic-Italian crosses. To be more specific, the highest average IQ is found in Singapore.
>
> No, the genetic groups are the Homo sapiens sapiens/Homo neanderthalus crosses, the Homo sapiens sapiens/Homo neanderthalus/Homo denisova crosses, and the pure Homo sapiens sapiens. These broadly align with Europe, Asia, and Africa, but not exactly

Now, the first thing to point out is that this is not in line with current scientific thought on the history of human genetics. The theory Beale is articulating here is that the species *Homo sapiens sapiens* emerged out of Africa and spread across the world, and in the course of doing so interbred with two other species, *Homo neanderthalus* in Europe, forming the white race, and then,

subsequently, *Homo denisova* in Asia (which, in the course of early human migration, would also include the native populations of the Americas). Historically speaking, this interbreeding did happen, but the relative impact on the human genome is generally thought to be minor by mainstream scientists, with socioeconomic factors and the myriad of methodological faults in IQ testing being considered a far more likely explanation for statistical variations among different ethnic populations.

Brown pushes Beale on this point in the interview. Here is the exchange:

Brown: Let me see if I've captured your overall approach. You feel it's important to examine and conduct science without regard to political correctness. For example, if Vanhanen and Lynn say IQ is genetic, you feel the most appropriate thing to do is not attack them for being racists, but simply examine their data and conclusions dispassionately. It's important to question it. Argue with it. Try to falsify, as we do with any other scientific claim. But not dismiss it simply on the basis that it doesn't agree with our what we feel is morally right. Correct?

Beale: Yes. Science and history and logic exist regardless of whether we are happy about them or not. We have to take them into account.

Brown: It appears the Lynn & Vanhanen book suggests the genetic IQ differences were caused, not by Homo crosses, but by natural selection operating in colder climates over long periods of time. Can you provide another reference that discusses the DNA tracing and IQ correlation of the various crosses?

Beale: There are many articles on the Internet about DNA and IQ, I suggest you simply search them out and read a few. The data is conclusive, the rationale explaining the data is not.

Brown: I'm not sure I understand what you mean when you said the rationale explaining the data is not conclusive. What do you mean by that?

Beale: Regarding rationale, the data is beyond dispute. But we cannot explain why the data is the way that it is, we can only construct various explanatory hypotheses. Historical explanations are, for the most part, scientific fairy tales, literal science fiction.

What is striking about this exchange is the way in which Beale's language elides something. Look at the tension between his phrases: "Science and history and logic exist regardless of whether we are happy about them or not," and, "Historical explanations are, for the most part, scientific fairy tales, literal science fiction." These two positions seem to tear at each other. Either history offers an inarguable truth that we might not like but cannot reject, or history offers only stories we tell ourselves.

It is possible, of course, that Beale is simply an idiot, and is as unaware of this as it appears that Brad Torgersen is that he is complaining that it's not the 1970s and he can't judge books by their covers. In some ways, that is the comforting hypothesis—that Beale is a bully spouting crank science he barely understands. Alas, I do not think it is the correct one. I have spent no small

amount of time looking at the mind of Theodore Beale, and I do not believe that this strange gap between two statements is an accident. He is a foolish and deluded man, but that is not the sort of fool he is.

If nothing else, Theodore Beale is a man of precision. His words accomplish what he means them to. He is a provocateur, and a troll. He enrages and stings and, yes, bullies. And he does so with brutal skill. He is a master of communicating a point that he is not quite willing to say, so that he can slither out of having to admit it. (Or, to use an ironically apt term, at dogwhistling.)

Case in point, let us return to the claim that N.K. Jemisin and he "are not equally homo sapiens sapiens," a viewpoint I characterized as suggesting that Jemisin is subhuman. But this is, in fact, slightly imprecise, albeit not in a way that changes the basic substance of the claim. In fact, it is not that Beale thinks Jemisin is subhuman, but that Beale believes his own genetics, which contain the Neanderthal and Denisovan genes, make him superhuman.

Ironically, we have already seen a near-perfect description of how best to engage with this sort of speech in the form of John C. Wright's description of the Occultic. Ultimately, that's all Beale is doing: he's hiding what he actually means behind a paper-thin veil so that it is communicated with deniability.

Let us then pierce the veil. After all, we have already noted that the belief that the occult means a truth that is inaccessible is not a necessary component of the approach—it is sufficient to believe in a truth that has not yet been seen. Put another way, while Theodore Beale may remain smugly silent on the precise question of what he believes (or, more accurately, he may be so staggeringly verbose that he can wriggle out of any attempt to characterize his beliefs simply by spewing forth more words to articulate them with ever-growing precision and ever-shrinking coherence). So I will not attempt to construct some absolute explanation of Theodore Beale's beliefs. Instead, I will construct a caricature of them.

A final quote of his, then:

> I am claiming that societies are incapable of moving from full primitivism to full civilization within the time frame that primitive African societies have been in contact with what we consider to be civilization. It is a genetic argument. It takes that long to kill off or otherwise suppress the breeding of the excessively violent and short-time preferenced. African-American men are 500 times more likely to possess a gene variant that is linked to violence and aggression than white American men.

By civilization, of course, we already know that he means a vision of civilization rooted in his specific view of Christianity. So his belief is that African people are genetically incapable of forming civilization, which is why it took the Neanderthal interbreeding to allow for a population in which stable

Christian governments (i.e. medieval feudalism) could take hold. Subsequently, these Christian societies spread the religion through the Neanderthal/Denisovan populations, who are even more genetically predisposed towards civilization.

So Beale believes himself ("a Native American with considerable Mexican heritage") to be among those with the superior genetic sequences (which include his Y chromosome along with his racial heritage) that allow him to be a representative of true civilization, that make him the perfect Vox Day. Indeed, Beale is obsessed with this sort of exceptionalism. When pressed, for instance, on the question of how he can blithely proclaim that he believes in France for the French and Germany for the Germans while being a Mexican-Native American living in Italy he simply proclaims himself to be one of the few immigrants capable of perfectly assimilating. In interviews he will casually declare that he's more intelligent than almost everyone. Perhaps most telling is his detailed theory of "the socio-sexual hierarchy," which begins with the usual categories of alpha males and beta males before finally reaching the Sigma Male, described as "the outsider who doesn't play the social game and manage [sic] to win at it anyhow," and who is "hated by alphas because sigmas are the only men who don't accept or at least acknowledge, however grudgingly, their social dominance," because in reality Sigmas "are at the top of the social hierarchy despite their refusal to play by its rules." Needless to say, Beale proclaims himself to be one.

The result is that Beale is the sort of person who unironically proclaims that his enemies are "in the position of Flatlanders attempting to defend against an opponent operating in three dimensions. We can come at them any time we want from directions they don't even know exist. But we don't need to come at them at all. We have our own objectives that they would not credit even if we explained them fully and in detail; they can no more grasp them than a Flatlander can comprehend a cube," and that if any of the "primitives" he opposes annoy him, "we will respond with lasers and cobalt bombs without even thinking twice about it. Or paying any attention to the collateral damage."

And yes, this is funny, not least because Beale seems to genuinely believe that this is anything short of completely ridiculous. But for all that parodying Theodore Beale is terribly easy, he at least has the potential to be dangerous. Were Beale to actually own up to the blatant implication of his views and to take up arms in defense of his blinkered view of civilization, he would at least be a fearsome beast—one whose monstrous grandeur demanded a serious response. Certainly this is what he would like us to think that he is. It's what he suggests when he speaks about how "the Taliban's behavior is entirely rational,

it is merely the consequence of different objectives and ruthlessness in pursuing them," the implication being that the problem with the Taliban is not their tactics but just the fact that they're employing those tactics in the name of Islam and not Beale's perverted mockery of Christianity. And it's what all his rhetoric about saving Western Civilization and fourth generation warfare would have one think he's doing. In his narrative, he's the master gamesplayer —the brilliant tactician masterminding the defense of Christendom.

Except that he's not taking up arms against the oppressors. He's just mocking them on Twitter and trolling literary awards. And the trolling isn't even his idea. Despite a years-long vendetta against the science fiction establishment (seemingly motivated, in his telling, by a con he went to and didn't have a very good time at), he never noticed the structural weakness in the Hugo rules. If Larry Correia hadn't made his devil's deal to get Beale's supporters, Beale would never have been in a position to play out his supposedly elaborate Xanatos Gambit to destroy the Hugos.

And his successes in other fields are hardly more glorious. His literary career consists of works published a Finnish ebook publisher living on the long tail of Amazon sales. His editorship at this publisher, which he nominated himself for two Hugos for, is so slipshod that his most recent book came out with two Chapter Fives. His supposedly illustrious career as a game designer consists of obscure flops; these days he makes free-to-play mobile gladiator games about buying and selling slaves. His musical career was as the third wheel in a techno group called Psykosonik signed to the Wax Trax! label after it had been bought out by TVT and nobody cared about it anymore, a band which achieved most of its success after he left. He proclaims himself an expert in economics, biology, and countless other topics, but this expertise consists of little more than regurgitating fringe opinions, which generally seem to be about all he's read. In short, in virtually every field in which Theodore Beale has ever applied himself he is at best a mediocrity, and the fact that he has managed to be mediocre at such a broad number of things over his life is down to little more than the fact that he had the good fortune to be the son of a multi-millionaire tax cheat.

I say "virtually every field," of course, because there is precisely one exception—a single field in which Theodore Beale has not only excelled, but can legitimately claim to be one of the absolute greats of: trolling. He is exceptionally good at being vicious and cruel to people in ways that get attention. It is not that his insults are particularly clever; "the Toad of Tor" is more or less par for the course with him. But he's adept at picking targets and willing to be persistent. Indeed, the paltry sales his books actually attain can

largely be chalked up to the free publicity generated by his multi-year trolling of John Scalzi. For all his talk of cobalt bombs and elaborate strategies, the truth is that literally his only demonstrable skill in the world is being rude to people.

You will forgive me, dear readers, if I opt for a different god than whatever it is he's the voice of.

Part Six: In Which Several Lousy Pieces of Science Fiction (Along With Some Lovely Stories About Dinosaurs and Jackalopes) Are Analyzed In Depth

But, of course, Theodore Beale's delusions of grandeur themselves are not up for Hugo Awards, merely some stories he selected. It remains theoretically possible that Beale is one of those rare visionary outsider artists, or that his taste in science fiction is, unlike his taste in divine purpose, actually quite good. "Judge the stories, not Theodore Beale," as his apologists would demand.

Let's turn next, then, to some of the nominees for short story, one of the categories fully dominated by the Rabid Puppies slate, although one writer, Annie Bellet, subsequently withdrew from the ballot noting that she had not been consulted about being included in either slate and did not want to win a Hugo this way. This leaves four stories: Lou Antonelli's "On a Spiritual Plane," Steve Rzasa's "Turncoat," Kary English's "Totaled," and John C. Wright's "The Parliament of Beasts and Birds." Two—Antonelli's and English's—originate on the Sad Puppies slate, while the other two were added by Beale. (Both, notably, were published by Castalia House, although "On a Spiritual Plane," came out in *Sci-Phi Journal*, a publication affiliated with Castalia House.)

Despite all coming from the same basic area of science fiction, there are ways in which these stories are genuinely varied. One cannot, for instance, seriously claim that all of them are unreconstructed pulp adventure yarns. Nor can one claim that they are uninterested in questions of technique or literary merit. That said, there are some striking similarities among them that go beyond the fact that Beale has a financial stake in three of them. In particular, they cluster around two themes, both closely related to Beale's political agendas.

The first of these is transhumanism, which is, to be fair, a hot topic in science fiction in general right now. But it's telling that Beale, like Wright, is overtly hostile to transhumanism, having written a short story called "The Logfile" that's little more than a description of a homicidal AI tied to an exceedingly dated joke about the floating point errors in the original Pentium chips. And it's notable that transhumanism is a big topic within the

neoreactionary movement—the two central writers within the movement are Nick Land, who was previously affiliated with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at Warwick University, and Curtis Yarvin, a frequent poster at the precursor boards to LessWrong, although not all neoreactionaries are as hostile towards it as Wright and Beale. It's also notable that transhumanism is widely used as a metaphor within queer and trans communities, an association dating back to Turing's "Computer Machinery and Intelligence."

And, tellingly, both "Turncoat" and "Totaled" share this hostility towards transhumanism. It's a story about a cybernetics researcher working on brain-preserving technology who gets into a car crash, which results in her being "totaled," which is to say, being deemed to require medical care in excess of her value as a human being. And so, having been totaled, she is sent to her old lab, which is tasked with using her decaying brain to finish what she'd been working on.

The politics of this are interesting—the underlying fear is, of course, that of the "death panels" that the Affordable Care Act supposedly introduced, but the concept of people being totaled is said to have "started back in the Teens when the Treaders put their first candidate in office," which is a clear reference to the Tea Party and their use of the Gadsden Flag. That said, the situation that the Treaders inherit is one of chaos: "Healthcare costs were insane. Insurance was almost impossible to get," which seems an indictment of Obamacare.

This ambivalence, however, is far to the left of anything Beale would support, and it's an open question whether he ever actually read the story before putting it on his slate; certainly he turned on it after English publicly denounced him, ultimately recommending leaving it off the list when voting. But regardless of English's intentions, the story itself—with its skepticism of transhumanism and the innately pro-life bent involved in making horror out of the concept of people being declared "totaled"—is nevertheless easy to read as supporting Beale's agenda.

As for the story's quality, its main drama comes from the narrator's gradual mental disintegration as her brain reaches the six-month limit of the technique being used to preserve it and succumbs to perfusion decay. This is conveyed in gradual changes to the narration style—for instance, in one of the first real indications of the impending decay, the narrator notes that "motor functions fail always first, then speech. I guess I'm luck lucky not to have, not to have any of those." It's moving, effective, and the same trick that Daniel Keyes won a Hugo with in 1960 for his story "Flowers for Algernon." So, if nothing else,

it satisfies Torgersen's apparent desire to undo fifty-five years of evolution of the genre of Hugo-winning science fiction.

"Turncoat," on the other hand, is inseparable from Beale, appearing in an anthology Beale edited and published, and being set in a fictional universe. It concerns a war in a world in which transhumanist ideas have been practically realized. The narrator is a sentient spaceship, described in fetishistic detail by Rzasa: "My suit of armor is a single Mark III frigate, a body of polysteel three hundred meters long with a skin of ceramic armor plating one point six meters thick. In the place of a lance, I have 160 Long Arm high-acceleration deep space torpedoes with fission warheads. Instead of a sword, I carry two sets of tactical laser turrets, twenty point defense low-pulse lasers, and two hypervelocity 100 centimeter projectile cannons." Piloting the mech are a group of posthumans, described as such: "The fragile grip with which they hold onto the remnants of their humanity is weakening. They call themselves posthumans, they adorn themselves with devices and the accouterments [sic] of machine culture, but they still cling to their flesh and to the outmoded ideas shaped by that flesh."

The war, it emerges, is between the posthumans and the surviving humans, who the cybernetic and immortal posthumans want to destroy. Over the course of the story, the narrator's sympathies gradually shift away from the posthumans, especially after they opt to abandon the practice of using living crews in favor of fully automated systems and threaten to reformat him for insubordination. ("I run a rapid analysis of the pros versus the cons of having my entire operating system rebooted and my memory banks wiped. The outcome is decidedly in favor of the cons. Whatever remains, it will not be me.") Eventually, as the title would suggest, the AI narrator defects to the humans because, as he puts it, "I want to be more than the sum of my programming… I want to decide what sort of man I will become."

Two things are striking about this story. First is just that it's not really very interesting. Its basic plots and themes are just anti-machine intelligence retreads of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*, which was a similar series of philosophical explorations of machine intelligence dressed up in plots, although Asimov favored the detective genre as opposed to paragraph-long lists of sci-fi weapons and descriptions of space combat. The nightmarish vision of posthumanity in "Turncoat" is just the all-conquering cyborgs in the mould of *Doctor Who*'s Cybermen and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s Borg, with "integration" un-subtly standing in for "assimilation" or "upgrading." The themes are similarly old hat—several paragraphs are spent discussing how the human ships "took more risks than we did, even though their fragility is orders

of magnitude greater than ours. They utilized tactics that did not appear to have a rational thought behind them, and yet, when the consequences are taken into consideration, their approach worked nearly as well as our eminently logical battle plan," which reads like the bad rip-off of Kirk/Spock arguments that it is.

This gets to the second striking thing about it, which is just that it's very badly written. "Totaled" was old hat, but at least was a retread of a genuine classic of science fiction. "Turncoat," on the other hand, is just genuinely poor writing from a basic technique standpoint. And it's worth spending some time on this specific point, simply because it gets to one of the few vaguely coherent aesthetic claims ever put forth by the Puppies, namely Correia's original contrast between pulp adventure and "literary" science fiction, a distinction more or less mirrored in Beale's "blue SF vs pink SF" bit of Newspeak.

One story that comes up a lot in terms of this is Rachel Swirsky's "If You Were a Dinosaur, My Love," a 2014 nominee for Best Short Story that is frequently cited by Beale's supporters when they talk about the awful and sorry state of the Hugo Awards and why their entryist tactics were necessary.

This is, of course, ridiculous, as it's by miles a better story than anything Beale nominated. For one thing, it's actually well-written. There's a poetic lilt to the language, which is soothingly iambic, like a story for a young child, which makes the emotional punch of it all the more acute. You can demonstrate this easily enough—here's a passage from Swirsky's story. Read it out loud, and pay attention to the way the language naturally falls into a rhythm:

> If they built you a mate, I'd stand as the best woman at your wedding. I'd watch awkwardly in green chiffon that made me look sallow, as I listened to your vows. I'd be jealous, of course, and also sad, because I want to marry you. Still, I'd know that it was for the best that you marry another creature like yourself, one that shares your body and bone and genetic template. I'd stare at the two of you standing together by the altar and I'd love you even more than I do now. My soul would feel light because I'd know that you and I had made something new in the world and at the same time revived something very old. I would be borrowed, too, because I'd be borrowing your happiness. All I'd need would be something blue.

Then try a bit of Steve Rzasa's "Turncoat":

> My eight torpedoes are engulfed by the swarm of counter-fire missiles. The Yellowjackets explode in bursts of tightly focused x-rays, highlighted in my scans as hundreds of slender purple lines. My torpedoes buck and weave as they take evasive maneuvers. Their secondary warheads, compact ovoid shapes nestled inside their tubular bodies, shatter and expel molybdenum shrapnel at hypervelocities. Tens of thousands of glittering metal shards spray out in silver clouds against the void of space.

I expect the difference is intuitively clear. If not, zero in on the phrases "I'd watch awkwardly in green chiffon that made me look sallow" and "their

secondary warheads, compact ovoid shapes nestled inside their tubular bodies, shatter and expel molybdenum shrapnel at hypervelocities."

Let's also look at the scope of the story. In less than a thousand words, Swirsky moves among moments of silliness ("you'd walk with delicate and polite a gait as you could manage on massive talons"), moments of tenderness ("I'd pull out a hydrangea the shade of the sky and press it against my heart and my heart would beat like a flower. I'd bloom. My happiness would become petals"), and moments of utter and tragic sadness as the story's real premise finally moves into focus in the closing paragraphs. More to the point, it mixes these—the detail of green chiffon early in the story acquires new resonance later when it becomes clear that these are the same dresses she'd already ordered for her now abandoned wedding. (And, of course, there's the beautifully human detail of her picking a dress she knows makes her bridesmaids look sallow.)

So, with Swirsky we have more emotional range than… well, any of Beale's picks, really, but certainly more than "Turncoat." More than that, the story does more—its move from a flight of fancy to a strangely sweet description of a wedding to brutal tragedy and finally to a strange and uneasy rejection of its own premise as the narrator admits that her revenge fantasy—her desire to see the men who put her fiancee in a coma get eviscerated by a dinosaur—is wrong, and cruel, and yet still powerful. There's nuance, and subtlety, and development. It's artful, and beautiful.

And it's everything that Theodore Beale and his ilk hate. Moreover, their usual objections—that it's either not SF/F or is crass message fiction—are both more than faintly daft. The claim that it's message fiction is based on a passing note that the narrator's fiancee was beaten by a drunken mob that thought he was gay. He wasn't, of course, hence the engagement to a woman, but apparently even a vague aversion to homophobic murder qualifies as message fiction, a standard that will be downright baffling in comparison with a later story. As for the claim that it's not SF/F, it's true that there are certainly ways to define the genre so as to exclude it, but there's clearly no way to talk about the story without talking about speculative fiction. Its central device—the desire for transformation—is clearly a fantasy trope, and moreover one clearly in the same vein as transhumanism. It was published in what is unambiguously a SF/F magazine, by a writer who routinely publishes in such circles. One can split hairs like "but he's not actually a dinosaur so it doesn't count," but this starts to look more than a little desperate, especially when the label being thrown at it is "Pink SF," which is to say, little more than a complaint that it's not manly enough. (Machismo, anybody?) But it's worth

reducing this claim to its purest essence – the one presented by Correia in his original Sad Puppies post when he bizarrely breaks down to all caps and onomotopeia – which is that the sort of banal recitations of "explosions good" are inherently more valuable and interesting than "feelings."

Getting back to the 2015 nominees, however, there are the other two stories, John C. Wright's "The Parliament of Beasts and Birds" and Lou Antonelli's "On a Spiritual Plain," both of which are overtly focused on religion.

Antonelli's story is superficially non-denominational, but its religious exploration is undeniable. Its premise is a world where the magnetic field causes ghosts to exist. The story deals with the human chaplain who ends up having to escort ghosts to the planet's north pole where they can dissipate, and its main point is to draw a firm line between this materialist phenomenon and the notion of the soul, which is to say, its main point is more theological axe-grinding, coming to a conclusion that shares a sense of biological purity characterizing the views of Wright and Beale. The idea of electromagnetic immortality is clearly in the vicinity of transhumanism, and is also firmly rejected by the story. The ghosts feel that they are wrong, and desire dissipation, some of them believing in a more legitimate afterlife, the main character included. Like "Totaled," it's not awful, but it's hard to say that a fictionalized argument for why ghosts as explained in various pseudoscientific accounts would be spiritually unsatisfying is particularly interesting as fiction instead of simply as an essay.

> As for the political intentions of Antonelli, I'll let him speak for himself as he praises the Sad Puppies movement: It's hard for people outside the U.S. to understand how badly our cultural elites were intentionally subverted during the Cold War by the Soviet Union. Most Americans are Christian, patriotic, and believe in a European-derived civilization. The children of the elites are not, and do not believe in these values. They think Christians are either bigots or stupid or both, America is evil, and European-based civilization is all that's wrong with the world.

He went on, rather impressively, to attempt to report Hugo Awards co-presenter David Gerrold to the Spokane police, claiming that he was dangerously unhinged and inciting people to violence in his remarks about the Sad Puppies. This is, to say the least, an absolutely ridiculous characterization of Gerrold, whose remarks on the Puppies were on the more moderate end of reactions, doubly so coming from anyone willing to be affiliated with Theodore Beale, who, recall, responds to comment spam by posting people's home addresses.

The topic of people being complete jerks, of course, brings us nicely back around to John C. Wright and the final nominee, "The Parliament of Beasts and Birds." The story, like most of Wright's work of the past few years, is an

overtly Christian allegory—in this case about the animals (depicted, fable-like, as singular representatives of the species given proper names—Hound and Wolf and Fox) gathering to discuss what is next for them after the end of Man. Ultimately, some are elevated to the status previously held by Man in God's creation and come to call themselves men while others retreat from the ruins of the city of Men and remain as beasts, although the story is clear that the cycle will repeat itself.

It is in several regards an odd story to see among the Puppies, at least in terms of what it does. It is, more than anything else discussed so far, unambiguously a piece of message fiction—a heavy-handed allegory devoted to espousing Wright's idiosyncratic brand of Catholicism and nothing more. It has no real plot in any traditional sense—it's basically all philosophical dialogue among the animals—and not much in the way of characterization either. The animals are all fairly generic anthropomorphic takes on their species: Hound is loyal, Fox cunning, Lion regal, et cetera. Moreover, its style is clearly aspiring towards the literary, as is most of Wright's serially florid prose, although like most of his efforts it reads more like an undisciplined first draft of someone doing a C.S. Lewis impression than like something showing craft and thought, frequently engaging in awkward redundancies like "a blood-red moonrise of a waning moon" and "beneath the crowns of pines and fir trees were deeper shadows in the shadow of the gathering night."

Its presence, in other words, is clearly down specifically to its politics and not its adherence to the supposed aesthetic whereby pulp adventure is good and literary message fiction is bad. (And it's worth noting that although "The Parliament of Beasts and Birds" was added to the list by Beale, Torgersen put two John C. Wright pieces on his original slate.) Its appeal to anyone who is not sympathetic to the Christian dominionist worldview borders on the non-existent. There are a handful of decent turns of phrase in amidst the awkwardness, but little more.

But it is perhaps most instructive to turn once again to what the Puppies, in practice, stand against. Following the Hugo Awards the list of the ten works that came closest to making the ballot in each category was released. And in Best Short Story the top non-Puppy contender was the story that won the Nebula Award for 2015, Ursula Vernon's "Jackalope Wives." The story has a fair amount in common with "The Parliament of Beasts and Birds," at least on a superficial level—both are heavily mythological stories featuring talking animals. But in essentially every regard Vernon's story is more interesting than Wright's.

Let's start with prose style, looking at the beginnings of the two stories. First, Wright's:

> The animals gathered, one by one, outside the final city of Man, furtive, curious, and afraid.
>
> All was dark. In the west was a blood-red sunset, and in the east a blood-red moonrise of a waning moon. No lamps shined in the towers and minarets, and all the widows of the palaces, mansions, and fanes were empty as the eyes of skulls. All about the walls of the city were the fields and houses that were empty and still, and all the gates and doors lay open.

And Vernon's:

> The moon came up and the sun went down. The moonbeams went shattering down to the ground and the jackalope wives took off their skins and danced. They danced like young deer pawing the ground, they danced like devils let out of hell for the evening. They swung their hips and pranced and drank their fill of cactus-fruit wine.

While both are reasonably rhythmic passages of prose, note how much more vivid the details chosen by Vernon are. Wright makes use of a few interesting words—"furtive," "minarets," and "fanes," for instance—but most of his descriptions are relatively straightforward. The double use of "blood-red" can fairly be described as parallelism, although it's hardly the most interesting phrase, but the double use of "empty" is just lazy, and the synonym of "the eyes of skulls" is both cliché and laying it on a little thick after a sentence with two uses of "blood-red."

Vernon, on the other hand, packs in the striking images. Moonbeams "shatter" down, while the jackalope wives are like "young deer pawing the ground" and "devils let out of hell for the evening." Even their choice of drink—"cactus-fruit wine"—is interesting and unusual, making the world of the story seem fresh and new. And, of course, there's the image that ends up being the central idea of the story, namely the jackalope wives taking off their skins.

But this sense of liveliness goes far deeper than just the quality of the prose. Vernon's story concerns the efforts of an old woman, Grandma Harken, to fix the damage caused when her grandson unwisely tries to capture a jackalope wife for himself. Harken, for her part, is a fascinating character of a type Vernon has long written well, namely the wise and practical old woman. And "Jackalope Wives" is full of genuinely wonderful moments on her part. "Be cruel or be kind, but don't be both, because now you've made a mess you can't clean up in a hurry," she says at one point, a phrase with more wisdom and sense of the world than the whole of Wright's tale. And this extends beyond just Grandma Harken—the narration of the story is similarly full of wisdom, with remarks like "a little magic is worse than none, for it draws the wrong sort of attention," or "'She was beautiful,' he said. As if it were a reason."

Wright's story has none of this wisdom to impart. And, perversely, the reason this is so is precisely because Wright's story is simply a piece of propaganda for a narrow and specified worldview. All its characters are simply mouthpieces for pre-existing ideas—a series of allusions to theology and mythology designed to lead to a singular conclusion, namely "You should worship God in this precise manner." There is nothing of the world in it—no lived experience or sense of empathy. Whereas Vernon's story, which has no moral save "You ought not change your mind midway through burning a jackalope wife's skin to try to catch her," is thus able to actually provide ideas and phrases that stick in the mind, and give the reader pause to think and consider.

And it's worth noting that the political differences between Vernon and Wright are part of why this is true. Vernon, it should be noted, is no extremist —she's an amiable center-left liberal unlikely to get polemical about anything other than gardening. But the sense of lived wisdom that Grandma Harken imparts to "Jackalope Wives" is something that comes very specifically out of Harken's status as a woman and, as is revealed in the story's resolution, a former jackalope wife herself. It is a wisdom that comes from being an outsider and being at the margins of the world.

Wright's story, on the other hand, has little room for women. The only animal to be gendered as female is Cat, who exists to do little more than recite wisdom imparted by Man. Otherwise, the only mention of Woman is as an oppressive figure when Cat tells Worm that "there is no more Woman to step upon your head." But beyond that it is, as the story reiterates again and again, a world of men, and one with no interest in or time for the wisdom of the margins.

Put simply, I am unable to seriously believe that there are more than a handful of people with any love for stories and reading who, looking at "The Parliament of Beasts and Birds" and "Jackalope Wives" side by side, could find any reason to prefer the former beyond the fact that it sends a particular political and religious message that they approve of. No, more than that—I believe that almost everybody who loves stories and art would, upon reading the two stories, be furious at the knowledge that a bunch of fascist bullies conspired to get Wright's story on the Hugo ballot at the expense of Vernon's.

Part Seven: No Award

Certainly that was, in practice, what happened. The reaction to the Sad Puppies among the rest of fandom was varied, but overwhelmingly hostile.

Some objected to the practice of organized slates, viewing them as cheating in terms of the spirit of the awards, if not the written rules. Others objected to the low quality of many of the nominees. Still others, myself included, objected to Beale's political agenda.

Whatever the objection, however, the Hugo Awards offered a means of resistance even in the face of the Puppies' domination of the nominating process. Hugo voting uses a ranked ballot with instant-runoff voting, and voters may opt to rank No Award in any position on their ballot. If No Award ends up winning the category (or if whatever would otherwise win ends up having been ranked below No Award on more ballots than not) then that's exactly what happens: no award is given in the category for the year. Prior to 2015, this had happened exactly five times—once in the one-time "New Author" category in 1959, and four times in Best Dramatic Presentation and its precursors, all due to a longstanding group of voters who oppose the category's existence, beating, among other things, classics such as *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, *Carrie*, *Logan's Run*, and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

I mention this last detail to provide some measure of context for Theodore Beale's claim that No Award winning constituted a victory for him and amounted to, to use the phrase repeated ad nauseum by his supporters, burning the awards down. Simply put, an award that's denied those films over something as silly as a longstanding dispute over whether the award should be a "pure" literary award and survived is not going to go to pieces because it decided against giving an award to fascist mediocrities. Beale can insist that he brilliantly put Hugo voters in the jaws of a Xanatos Gambit whereby every choice is a losing move, but frankly, if God Herself came down from heaven and proclaimed Theodore Beale to be an idiot, Beale would declare that getting Her attention constituted victory, and there's no reason to take him seriously.

Indeed, there's precedent for Hugo voters using No Award to punish slate voting tactics before, as in 1987 when the Scientologists bulk-nominated in order to get the second of L. Ron Hubbard's *Mission Earth* novels on the ballot, placing the book in sixth, below No Award, just as they did with "Opera Vita Aeterna" in 2014.

Opinions on how best to use No Award varied. Some, such as George R.R. Martin, argued for using it sparingly and evaluating the works on their own merits. Others, such as Deirdre Saoirse Moen, advocated for a Puppy-free ballot where the handful of non-Puppy candidates were voted on normally, followed by No Award. And then there was the third position, which I, on the

back of an instant reaction blog post titled "The Day Fandom Ended" that rather unexpectedly got widely quoted in some of the earliest mainstream news stories about the controversy, ended up being one of the main spokespeople for: simply vote No Award in all categories, ahead of all nominees, Puppy and otherwise.

My argument was straightforward: Beale's antics were so odious as to taint the entire award. As I put it in "The Day Fandom Ended," "an award whose nominations are, in six categories, dominated entirely by neofascists, and where Theodore Beale has that kind of influence has already lost legitimacy." When 68% of your nominees are hand-selected by fascist trolls, you have lost legitimacy.

And make no mistake, it's not dumb luck that the Hugos are where this front of the culture wars sprung up. Science fiction fandom has always been a haven for eccentrics—anyone who doubts this need only look up a few paragraphs to note that the Hugos have a historical bloc of voters opposed to film and television. But that's also true politically. It's easy enough to trace a long progressive heritage of science fiction that starts by noting that the genre was invented by Mary Shelley in 1816, and that one if its earliest practitioners was the avowed socialist H.G. Wells, and then continues through writers like Le Guin, Delaney, and Butler in the 70s right up to avowed Marxist China Miéville in the present day. And I would argue that this progressive heritage is the beating heart of the genre. But there's always been a reactionary streak, from the committed racism of H.P. Lovecraft to the crypto-fascism of Robert Heinlein to the homophobia of Orson Scott Card and, for that matter, to the techno-libertarianism that spawned the neoreactionary movement.

Which is to say that the fascist tendencies of Theodore Beale have always been an ugly undercurrent within science fiction, and one that we cannot, in good conscience, simply wish away. Certainly not in a year when that tendency succeeded so thoroughly in controlling the genre's biggest awards. There is no serious way to deny that the Hugo nominations in 2015 were a massive victory for fascism. And my inclination was that the much larger body of voters Beale and Torgersen shut out of the process with their tactics should send an even louder message in return.

The actual outcome was not, in the end, quite so melodramatic as I'd hoped. But it was still, by any reasonable measure, a crushing defeat for the Puppies. All five categories in which there were no non-Puppy nominees (Best Novelette opened up following the disqualification of a John C. Wright story on the grounds that it had first been published prior to 2014) went to No Award—as many as had been awarded in the entire previous history of the

Hugos. In other categories, the only Puppy nominee to win was *Guardians of the Galaxy* in Best Dramatic Presentation Long Form, an outcome that, let's be honest, was probably going to happen with or without the Puppies. Outside of the two Best Dramatic Presentation categories the only Puppy to beat No Award in its category was Jim Butcher's *The Skin Game*, a novel in the popular *Dresden Files* series from an author who maintained a dignified silence through the entire process. Other than that, however, the Puppies were routed.

More significant, however, were the numbers. The 2015 Hugo Awards had a record number of voters—5950—as fans who had not previously joined the Worldcon flocked to it in the face of the controversy. And the overwhelming majority of those fans did so in order to stand up to the fascists. In Best Novella, the most voted-on category to go No Award, 3495 people ranked No Award as their top choice, versus 1842 who voted for any of the Puppy nominees. Even in the least voted-on category, Best Fancast, which got 3384 votes (still more than any category had gotten in 2014), 2098 of those voters put No Award ahead of any of the Puppy nominees.

That is not to say that the Puppies had no impact on the awards. There were about 500 voters who voted more or less in line with Beale's voting recommendations, a number that, in a normal year, would be more than enough to win several of the smaller categories. Moreover, these votes appear to have been the deciding factor in Cixin Liu's victory in the Best Novel category for *The Three-Body Problem*, a victory that, while certainly not undeserved, remains troubling for reasons addressed in a subsequent essay in this volume. But it was, on the whole, an absolute and emphatic victory for the position that the Hugo Awards are better when a bunch of fascist entryists don't try to hijack them.

In some ways more striking, however, was simply the awards ceremony itself. There were a number of facets of it that were genuinely moving. The way that winner after winner took the stage in order to speak out in favor of diversity and inclusion, most notably Best Fan Writer winner Laura Mixon, who gave an explicit shout-out to the Black Lives Matter movement, an unambiguous and necessary political act in the context, for instance. Or the fact that the two prose categories that did not go to No Award went to works in translation, with Best Novelette going to Dutch writer Thomas Olde Heuvelt's "The Day The World Turned Upside Down," an outcome that can only be called a genuine victory for diversity. Or the progressive bonafides of several winners in other categories such as *Ms. Marvel*, a phenomenally good and innovative superhero comic about a young Pakistani-American woman in Jersey City in Best Graphic Story (and one that specifically enraged John C.

Wright, who, when the character was added to the roster of the Avengers, compared having a Muslim on the Avengers to "if, during World War Two, a comic book made one of their heroines a member of the Nazi party" and complained that the lineup lacked "any Christian White Male Adults who might act like a Father figure, a leader, an alpha male, a hero") and the overtly feminist and queer-friendly *Orphan Black*, which pulled off a shock win over *Doctor Who* in Best Dramatic Presentation Short Form. Or, for that matter, when, prior to the Hugos proper, an award was given for accomplishments in collections to a man whose name I did not catch, simply for the fact that the Hugos are and probably always will be the sort of ceremony where a middle-aged white man with a neckbeard wins an award for collecting stuff, a fact that sci-fi fandom ought relish just as much as any other.

But I think my favorite moment came when veteran science fiction writer Robert Silverberg gave a speech, as he has at every Hugo ceremony for years, in which he offered what he called a "prayer for the Hugos," before breaking into a lengthy and funny anecdote about the only previous time such a thing was offered. It was a good anecdote, but the best part, to my mind, was a small detail about it, namely what year the previous prayer had been offered. Because if you want to sum up the importance of the progressive tradition within science fiction in a single fact, you really can't do much better than the fact that the 1968 Worldcon was held in Berkeley California.

It's not all sunshine and roses from here. Although an amendment to Hugo voting that would neuter the effectiveness of slate voting passed at the 2015 Worldcon, it needs to be ratified in 2016 before it can go into effect, which means that the 2016 Hugo Awards have the same structural vulnerabilities that let the Puppies dominate the nominations, and Beale has made it clear that he intends to troll them even harder. There's a very good chance, in other words, that we're going to have to do this all again next year. And a real chance that the large crowd of fans who rushed to the defense of the Hugos this year will prove to have less long-term commitment than Beale and his supporters, who are, if nothing else, tenacious.

But for now, at least, we won.

Part Eight: God Will Bury You. Nature Will Bury You.

That covers the actual response in terms of the Hugos. But there are other ways to make a statement, and the award ceremony is not necessarily the best one. So allow me to make another sort. One that will discard all traces of the Occultic, and engage in nothing save for the most explicit clarity that I can muster.

I have not always been the most faithful of science fiction readers. I don't read a ton of novels in a year, and those that I do tend to be from a select few favorite authors. But since I was a child, I knew the phrase "Hugo Award" carried weight. I knew they mattered, and that they pointed towards stories that might not be things I loved, but would always be things I respected. As an adult, I've followed them from afar, never weighing in on the major categories, but having Firm Opinions on the minor ones. I rejoiced in *Doctor Who*'s three-year streak, politely disagreed but understood why *Doctor Horrible* beat Moffat in 2009, largely agreed with "Blackwater" winning in 2013, and until this year thought that the victory of Gollum's acceptance speech at the MTV Movie Awards in 2004 was the biggest travesty in Hugo history.

Likewise, in "Best Graphic Story" I laughed as *Girl Genius* won three years ago, hilarious evidence of how out of line the Hugo voters were with most comics fans (although it's not a bad comic, to be fair—as always, the Hugos were a reliable indicator of quality, if not a sane one). I cheered when Ursula Vernon's *Digger*, a weird webcomic eligible because of some print collections, won a shock victory in 2012—a choice that's just as weird as *Girl Genius*, but that aligns perfectly with my own idiosyncratic loves. I love that the awards went to *Saga* in 2013, then *XKCD* in 2014, both brilliant choices, and yet so wildly far apart in style and even medium. What other award would or could do that?

I love the Hugos. I haven't participated in them before, but I have loved them since childhood, and I love them to this day.

Fuck you, Theodore Beale.

Fuck you for trying to break a thing I loved. Fuck you for doing it to serve your stupid, lame fascist ideology. More to the point, fuck you for your stupid, lame fascist ideology. Your beliefs are horrible. You're horrible. You're a nasty, cruel little bully, and I genuinely hate your stupid fascist guts.

Fuck you for making me feel that way. Fuck you for the way you've brought this thing that I love, this celebration of great science fiction, to a point where it is full of the sort of mean and hateful desires that seem to animate you. Fuck you for dragging us all down to your sorry level. Fuck you for being so odious that we have to go there, and that we have to spend a year fighting you instead of celebrating the work we love.

And fuck you for making me want you to hate me. Fuck you for all of your beliefs that amount to nothing short of hatred for the things I love. For the people I love. For the art and beautiful things that are why I get out of bed in the morning. Fuck you for living your life for the sole purpose of destroying things that I love, and for making me wish that I could destroy something of

yours in retaliation. Fuck you for making me write this, in the sincere and passionate hope that it will make you feel even a moment's unpleasantness.

And fuck you for the very real possibility that a work nominated purely because you used your noxious little voice to rally your loathsome, asshole supporters to support it might win a Hugo Award next year, when we have to do this all again. Fuck you because it's actually possible that you will break the Hugos successfully and demonstrate that you're oh so much stronger than a bunch of fans who were previously just happily attending a convention and voting for stuff they loved in awards. In short, fuck you.

I would also like to make two things very clear.

First of all, you are wrong, Theodore Beale. You are the emperor of a tiny patch of shit, and if you are remembered, it will only be as a joke. You are not a great man. Yours is not the voice of god, but just the voice of a sad, pathetic man. You will die, and everything you wrote will be lost to the sands of time, and everything you valued will become a half-forgotten relic if it becomes anything at all. Nobody will care. The world you want will never arise.

Instead will be the future. There will be new things, and new ideas, and some of them will be better than any idea I've ever had, and virtually all of them will be better than any idea you've ever had. The future will not be made of the ideas of the 1970s, or the 1870s, or the 1770s, or before. It will be made of ideas that you and I have never imagined. It will be made of weird and strange and scary things, just like good science fiction is, and it will be amazing for it. And if there is an afterlife from which you can watch the future unfold, you will hate every bit of it.

But I don't think you will. I think you will die, and when you are dead, you will just be dead, and moreover be forgotten, and that you will have never once tasted a morsel of the joy that Rachel Swirsky's "If You Were a Dinosaur My Love" or Ursula Vernon's "Jackalope Wives" have brought to me.

Which brings us to the second thing.

You have already lost.

Sure, maybe you'll take the Hugos, and you'll give them an end date in historical relevance. No matter what, you've left an ugly footnote in the history of science fiction, like a puppy on a sidewalk. But the only reason you wanted to do that was because you were mad that we were having fun, liking the science fiction and fantasy that we liked.

And guess what, Theodore Beale?

We're still liking it. Stuff the ballot box all you want, but "If You Were a Dinosaur My Love" was still a great story, and there's nothing you can possibly do to change that. Take over a major industry award. Progressive science

fiction will just move its critical praise to other awards, or to individual critics' year-end lists. We will carry on, and we will identify and praise brilliant works of science fiction, and the stuff we like will endure in history while the stuff you like is forgotten.

This is not, to be clear, a threat. I am not proposing some counter-slate for 2016, or some set of tactics of resistance. I'm simply offering a sober and considered assessment of the likely critical future of the two schools of science fiction that you and your followers have articulated, and suggesting that the progressive, literary tradition that includes Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Rachel Swirsky, and many, many others is going to endure and thrive, whereas your fascist drivel will wither, and that none of your trolling and bullying is going to make a whit of difference in either our carrying on of the act of loving these works nor in their enduring reception. And while there are a lot of reasons for this, not least that our stories don't suck and yours do, I think there's one that really settles this matter straightforwardly and decisively.

We are, after all, talking about a genre that is about imagining the future. And in a debate over the nature of a genre about the future, it seems to me terribly obvious that the side that values the future and savors its imaginative possibilities is going to win out over the side that hates and fears it.

So to that end, here's a celebration of some stuff that I bet Theodore Beale really hates.

Part Nine: I Really, Really Want To Thank You For Dancing To The End

There are works on the Hugo ballot that were not selected by Theodore Beale that are genuinely worth celebrating. And, in some ways more importantly, there are works that weren't on the Hugo ballot because of Theodore Beale that are genuinely worth celebrating. But I'd like to focus on two things, both eligible in 2014, but, for a variety of reasons, nowhere near the ballot, the first because it's from a small comics publisher that not enough people in the Hugos crowd have heard of, the second because, despite being eligible, it's simply not the sort of thing most Hugo voters look at. But they represent choices in the two categories nearest and dearest to my heart, Best Graphic Story and Best Dramatic Presentation. And, more importantly, they present a worldview that is absolutely and completely opposite that of Theodore Beale.

The first, in Best Graphic Story, is *Uber*, written by Kieron Gillen and drawn by a couple of artists, and published by Avatar Press. What strikes me as particularly appealing about *Uber* is the fact that it so directly engages with the iconography of fascism. It is an alternate history World War II comic in which the Nazis, in the dying days of the War, turn the tide with the invention of superheroes. And Gillen is careful to work scrupulously within a set of rules. The mechanics of superheroes are as well-defined as any military technology, with much of the plot hinging on the gradual development of tactics for superhuman warfare. Everything is grounded in thorough historical research.

So the result is a brutally well thought out dissection of the intersections between the idea of the superhero and the fascist hero in all its post-Nietzschean glory. It's right there in the title, *Uber*, a direct invocation of the idea of the ubermensch. Because make no mistake—the book is anti-fascist. It is a gruesome, explicit depiction of the material horror that was Nazi Germany. It's a reminder that people like Theodore Beale are not harmless cartoon villains to laugh at, but horrible people responsible for some of the worst atrocities in human history, and that war is not some happy fantasy of bringing righteous justice to the unworthy, but a miserable slog of human suffering.

But more than that, it's a brilliant and nuanced exploration of the fascist narrative, and the ways in which it is deeply historically entwined with the history of science fiction as a genre. It is not the first book to do so, obviously. Norman Spinrad's 1972 novel *The Iron Dream*, which imagines an alternate history where Hitler became a hack sci-fi writer in America, is probably the most notable in terms of just how much it anticipates this mess, although I'd argue that there is no greater parody of the Sad Puppies than J.G. Ballard's 1968 "Why I Want To Fuck Ronald Reagan." But it is an astonishingly thorough exploration of it—an uncompromising mix of material realism and genre tropes that feels staggeringly relevant today.

But I think what I love most about it, at least in this context, is that it purports to be exactly what the Puppies want: serious-minded military science fiction, with a focus on battle and combat and valor. It's got spectacular gore and body horror. It's dark as dark can be, and uncompromising. It holds nothing back, ever. Even its focus on strict rules has the flavor of wargaming, the obvious pinnacle of the Puppy aesthetic. And it takes all of these things and turns them cruelly and savagely against their supposed masters. The only reason Theodore Beale could possibly fail to hate it is if he's too stupid to understand it. Which is, admittedly, a risk.

The other, and perhaps stranger pick, is the music video for Janelle Monáe's "Electric Lady." It is perhaps worth contextualizing this slightly, since the video depends in part on a general understanding of Janelle Monáe's work. "Electric Lady" is the title single off her second full-length album, released in 2013, which contains the fourth and fifth parts of an ongoing song cycle she calls the Metropolis Suite. This cycle features her alter-ego Cindi Mayweather, a time-travelling robot rebel from a Fritz Lang-inspired futuristic dystopia.

As this last fact suggests, Monáe is a keen sci-fi fan, and draws heavily from sci-fi iconography in her work, which falls squarely under the subgenre of afrofuturism, an artistic movement that uses the imaginative possibilities of science fiction to try to conceive of the African Diaspora not in terms of its tragic past but in terms of the generative potential of the future. The robot, for Monáe, is an all-purpose metaphor for the oppressed—as she puts it, "When I speak about science-fiction and the future and androids, I'm speaking about the 'other.' The future form of the 'other.' Androids are the new black, the new gay or the new women."

It is this that is why I want to close my discussion of Theodore Beale with her. Because this seems, in so many ways, like the polar opposite of everything he wants. Monáe, in embracing the robot as an image of all of the oppressed populations Beale scorns and despises, makes the idea into the very thing that Beale and Wright paint as a nightmarish vision of transhumanism.

As a song, "Electric Lady" is an anthem in praise of Cindi Mayweather, long on braggadocio, but framed in terms of Monáe's carefully worked out vision of black female sexuality, as in the breakdown:

> Gloss on her lips
> Glass on the ceiling
> All the girls showin' love
> While the boys be catchin' feelings
> Once you see her face, her eyes you'll remember
> And she'll have you fallin' harder than a Sunday in September
> Whether in Savannah, K-Kansas or in Atlanta
> She'll walk in any room have you raising up your antennas
> She can fly you straight to the moon or to the ghettos
> Wearing tennis shoes or in flats or in stilettos
> Illuminating all that she touches
> Eye on the sparrow
> A modern day Joan of a Arc or Mia Farrow
> Classy, Sassy, put you in a razzle-dazzy
> Her magnetic energy will have you coming home like Lassie
> Saying "ooh shock it, break it, baby"
> Electro, sofista, funky, lady
> We the kind of girls who ain't afraid to get down
> Electric ladies go on and scream out loud

But the video cheekily grounds the song not in Monáe's sci-fi vision, but in the mundane world of everyday black experience. The group is not the Electrified Ladies, as Monáe's mother thinks, but Electro Phi Beta, a black sorority whose party Monáe is en route to as the video begins. This opening minute blends a look at the material reality of young black women with wry honesty—note, in particular, the affectionate grin as Monáe leaves, shaking her head at her mother's confusion—with a strange set of iconography that is at once retro (the car the Electro Phi Betas take to the party has an 8-Track) and cutting edge (Monáe snaps a picture of her sisters using a state-of-the-art smartwatch).

And this aesthetic blend continues through the whole video, which is a classic dance party video of people getting down at the party (complete with the Electro Phi Betas Emeritus, a wall of video screens featuring women not at the party but dancing along with the party, in reality a variety of Monáe's collaborators) featuring a crowd of contemporary youth, primarily but not exclusively black, simply having a good time as more and more revelers pour in, including, towards the end, a group of lightsaber-wielding linedancers, all joyously grooving to the music and celebrating their bodies and sexualities and identities and lives.

The result is to blend the musical traditions that inform Monáe's music with the real lives of people, especially black people in 2014 and her vision of a sci-fi future, which is tied implicitly to the digital technology of the current age. None of these are things Theodore Beale would approve of. And he certainly wouldn't approve of blending them together in the name of, as the lyrics put it, "All the birds and the bees dancing with the freaks in the trees." It's a celebration of the weird, the marginal, and the new. Of everything that Theodore Beale hates. It is difficult to imagine how you would even engineer something better suited to annoying him than afrofuturist robots extolling the virtues of getting down. And it's wonderful.

But perhaps best of all, it is completely unconcerned with the likes of Theodore Beale. It does not seek their praise, which it would clearly never get anyway. It does not seek their antagonism, although it surely receives it. It does not consider itself for their consumption or use, and does not care one way or the other what they make of it. It simply loves itself, and its ideas, and the joy of them, and invites us to love them too.

While far away on the Internet, the self-proclaimed voice of god squawks its disapproval, and the future draws closer by the day.

About the Author

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Notes

[←1]

There is, if nothing else, a good Bayesian reason to do so given Brandon Carter's Doomsday argument, which suggests that it is probable humanity is closer to its end than its beginning.

[←2]

A hypothetical apocalypse in which self-replicating nanomachines convert the entirety of the world into themselves. Compare to footnote 5.

[←3]

Yudkowsky's account of Bayes' theorem can be found at http://yudkowsky.net/rational/bayes

[←4]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/ia/focus_your_uncertainty/

[←5]

"Artificial Intelligence as a Positive and Negative Factor in Global Risk," page 27
http://intelligence.org/files/AIPosNegFactor.pdf

[←6]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/kg/expecting_short_inferential_distances
Note that this really is an argument for why you don't have to listen to people who disagree with you.

[←7]

RationalWiki's article on the subject, largely penned by this book's preliminary editor David Gerard, is probably the best guide, although Yudkowsky fans absolutely hate it. http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Roko%27s_Basilisk

[←8]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/cbs/thoughts_on_the_singularity_institute_si/

[←9]

https://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/education-libertarian

[←10]

We'll return to Thiel in the book's final essay, in any case.

[←11]

http://urbit.org/

[←12]

http://www.inc.com/tess-townsend/why-it-matters-that-an-obscure-programming-conference-is-hosting-mencius-moldbug.html covers one such instance, and also has a jaw-dropping Moldbug quote in which he hairsplits about whether he said black people were inherently better slaves or not before saying, of making a good slave, "in any case, it is easiest to admire a talent when one lacks it, as I do."

[←13]

A viewpoint most explicitly discussed in http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/07/why-carlyle-matters.html

[←14]

Which makes it ironic as hell that *The Matrix* was made by two trans women.

[←15]

For simplicity's sake, I'm just going to cite the Gentle Introduction as GI and the part number. In this case, GI 1. Most of it can be found at http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/moldbugs-gentle-introduction/, save for Part 9d, which is at http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/11/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified.html

[←16]

Likewise, the Open Letter will be OL. OL 4 in this case. The whole thing can be found at http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/moldbugs-open-letter/

[←17]

OL 2

[←18]

OL 3

[←19]

OL 6

[←20]

Ibid.

[←21]

An alternate spelling of the Greek Muse of History.

[←22]

GI 1

[←23]

More on this in the book's fourth essay.

[←24]

OL 1

[←25]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2013/09/technology-communism-and-brown-scare.html

[←26]

https://medium.com/@curtis.yarvin/why-you-should-come-to-lambdaconf-anyway-35ff8cd4fb9d

[←27]

http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/, henceforth cited as DE.

[←28]

http://divus.cc/london/en/article/nick-land-ein-experiment-im-inhumanismus

[←29]

http://www.xenosystems.net/the-cult-of-gnon/

[←30]

http://www.xenosystems.net/re-accelerationism/

[←31]

From Deleuze's "Letter to a Harsh Critic," in the collection *Negotiations*.

[←32]

For what it's worth, Yudkowsky very much busts the flush on this one, declaring that he has no interest in any mind-altering substances, including alcohol, although he does express interest in a pill to turn himself bisexual.

[←33]

GI 1

[←34]

http://wondermark.com/1k62/

[←35]

From Sedgwick's divinely titled "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in her book *Touching Feeling*.

[←36]

Google “do you want to sell sugar water” if you want the joke explained to you.

[←37]

GI 1

[←38]

Moldbug's idiosyncratic way of referring to the US Government.

[←39]

GI 8

[←40]

GI 9a

[←42]

Hanson's paper is at http://mason.gmu.edu/~rhanson/greatfilter.html

[←43]

"On the Exterminator," in *Phyl-Undhu*

[←44]

"Abstract Horror," in *Plyl-Undhu*

[←45]

H.P. Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction”

[←46]

Alexander blogs at *Slate Star Codex*, where he flirts with neoreaction like a horny teenager befuddled by a bra.

[←47]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/qx/timeless_identity/

[←48]

Indeed, Yudkowsky offers “it proves we should invest in cryonics to prevent death” as the most obvious practical application of timeless identity.

[←49]

Yudkowsky sets up this approach, which he calls timeless decision theory, in an exceedingly dry and lengthy paper at http://intelligence.org/files/TDT.pdf

[←50]

Roko's post has been spectacularly deleted, but the text, along with pertinent replies, is preserved at http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Roko%27s_basilisk/Original_post

[←51]

Ibid

[←52]

http://www.xenosystems.net/basking-in-the-basilisk/

[←53]

A predecessor organization to MIRI

[←54]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/38u/best_career_models_for_doing_ research/344l

[←55]

In the essay “Making It With Death,” collected in *Fanged Noumena*.

[←57]

GI 9b

[←58]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/04/formalist-manifesto-originally-posted.html

[←59]

Ibid

[←60]

GI 2

[←61]

His book is entitled *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*.

[←62]

Eliezer Yudkowsky, *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality*, Chapter 6. The full book is available at http://www.hpmor.com/

[←63]

Basically, it argues that God either exists or does not, and that one has a choice to either believe in him or not, then applies basic game theory to the four possible combinations and concludes that the misfortune of eternal torment that occurs if one disbelieves God and he's real is so vastly worse than the misfortune of believing in a non-existent God that it's rational to believe in God. If you're new to this argument, I promise you that whatever objection you've just come up with has already been written about extensively.

[←64]

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/10853648/Richard-Dawkins-I-am-a-secular-Christian.html for instance

[←65]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/10/how-dawkins-got-pwned-part-2.html

[←66]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/10/interstitial-comments-on-dawkins.html - the initial comment about Yudkowsky is in Part 2 of "How Dawkins Got Pwned," linked in both the previous and next footnotes.

[←67]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/10/how-dawkins-got-pwned-part-2.html

[←68]

Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*

[←69]

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Book 3

[←70]

Ibid

[←71]

Ibid

[←72]

OL 4

[←73]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2010/02/from-mises-to-carlyle-my-sick-journey.html

[←74]

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Book 1

[←75]

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Book 6

[←76]

DE

[←77]

OL 1

[←78]

GI 1

[←79]

Ibid

[←80]

Iain M. Banks, *Excession*

[←81]

Most obviously in “Technology, communism and the Brown Scare.”

[←82]

Derbyshire is a longstanding conservative windbag notable for getting sacked by the *National Review* in 2012 after he wrote a column in *Taki's Magazine* that contained such advice as "Do not act the Good Samaritan to blacks in apparent distress, e.g., on the highway." That's at http://takimag.com/article/the_talk_nonblack_version_john_derbyshire

[←83]

http://weirdfictionreview.com/2011/11/m-r-james-and-the-quantum-vampire-by-china-mieville/

[←84]

All from DE

[←85]

http://weirdfictionreview.com/2011/11/m-r-james-and-the-quantum-vampire-by-china-mieville/

[←86]

Ibid.

[←87]

Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure. That probably didn't need a footnote, did it?

[←88]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/09/how-dawkins-got-pwned-part-1.html

[←89]

Ibid.

[←90]

Ibid.

[←91]

Ibid

[←92]

http://yudkowsky.net/singularity/aibox/

[←93]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/up/shut_up_and_do_the_impossible/

[←94]

http://yudkowsky.net/singularity/aibox/

[←95]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/1pz/the_ai_in_a_box_boxes_you/5vkw

[←96]

Hannibal Season 1, Episode 2: "Amuse-Bouche"

[←97]

Hannibal Season 3, Episode 2: "Primavera"

[←98]

Hannibal Season 1, Episode 5: "Coquilles"

[←99]

http://www.xenosystems.net/the-cult-of-gnon/

[←100]

Hannibal Season 3, Episode 5: “Contorno”

[←101]

http://www.xenosystems.net/the-cult-of-gnon/

[←102]

Hannibal Season 3, Episode 1: “Antipasto”

[←103]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/04/formalist-manifesto-originally-posted.html

[←104]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/07/why-carlyle-matters.html

[←105]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2010/02/from-mises-to-carlyle-my-sick-journey.html

[←106]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2011/10/thos-carlyle-on-steve-jobs.html

[←107]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/11/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified.html

[←108]

http://www.xenosystems.net/hrx/

[←109]

http://www.xenosystems.net/tag/utilitarianism/

[←110]

As one character quips to Hannibal, “You no longer have ethical concerns, Hannibal. Only aesthetic ones.” (In Season 3, Episode 1: “Antipasto”)

[←111]

This isn't quite true.

[←112]

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Book 9

[←113]

Ibid

[←114]

Ibid

[←115]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/09/how-dawkins-got-pwned-part-1.html

[←116]

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Book 9

[←117]

Specifically in his 2001 book *How Milton Works*.

[←118]

The most relevant essay would probably be “How To Recognize a Poem When You See One” in his book *Is There a Text in This Class?*

[←119]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2010/02/from-mises-to-carlyle-my-sick-journey.html

[←120]

It's in *Fanged Noumena* if you're into that kind of thing.

[←121]

http://www.xenosystems.net/monkey-business/

[←122]

http://www.xenosystems.net/vauung/

[←123]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/6vq/on_the_unpopularity_of_cryonics_life _sucks_but_at/4kzu

[←124]

DE

[←125]

I've generally eschewed cross-referencing my own books here, but pointing out that S. Alexander Reed and I present a positive vision of this exact same metaphor in our book for the *33 1/3* series on They Might Be Giants' *Flood* is irresistible.

[←126]

While we're being irresistible, in light of certain developments since the first printing of this book I would be remiss not to flag the productive line of thought that extends from the right to be invaded to arguments about transgender women "invading" women's spaces. Readers are advised to consult "My Vagina is Haunted: Notes on TERFs" later in this volume.

[←127]

Their favored proponent of this idea blogs under the name “hbd chick” and, in a stunning bit of facetiousness, traces her interest in scientific racism to a picture book about Eskimos she had growing up.

[←128]

This claim is oft-cited but impressively difficult to actually pin down an original source for. These days it's most often cited to Thomas Sowell's *Race and Culture*, where he makes the point that the 15 point IQ gap between black and white Americans is equal to that of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews in Israel. The claim about Northern Ireland is cited to H.J. Eysenck's *The IQ Argument*, however, and doesn't quite check out. Eysenck is actually arguing the Irish have low IQs, which is part and parcel of his general support for scientific racism throughout his career. But Eysenck didn't conduct the original study either, and had Sowell followed through another step he'd have arrived at John Macnamara's *Bilingualism and Primary Education: A Study of Irish Experience*, which actually does contain the original research, and which more or less supports Sowell's actual point. Macnamara wasn't studying religious difference but linguistic, comparing English and Irish Gaelic speakers, but he attempted to control for the issue of students working in their dominant or secondary languages by including non-verbal testing, and the language divide encompasses the same economic disparities that the religious divide did. In any case, Macnamara actively rejected Eysenck's summary of his work, which argued firmly that the sharp differences were due to environmental factors. Sowell's claim about Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, incidentally, is cited to Sammy Smooha's *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict*, and you can follow that rabbit hole yourself if you care.

[←129]

The original Derbyshire quote comes from this interview: http://gawker.com/5900452/i-may-give-up-writing-and-work-as-a-butler-interview-with-john-derbyshire

[←130]

Ibid

[←131]

Andorra, Belarus, Bolivia, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Republic of Congo, Guatemala, Ivory Coast, Kyrgyzstan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Mali, Marshall Islands, Monaco, Mongolia, Paraguay, Sao Tome and Principe, Sweden, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and the Vatican City. Note that many of those were not invaded by the British because France or Spain got there first.

[←132]

This isn't actually quite true.

[←133]

From DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*

[←134]

http://divus.cc/london/en/article/nick-land-ein-experiment-im-inhumanismus?printLayout=true

[←135]

https://github.com/cgyarvin/urbit/blob/master/doc/book/1-nock.markdown if you really want to read the documentation for Urbit to validate that. I highly recommend not wanting that, though.

[←136]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/sr/the_comedy_of_behaviorism/

[←137]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/go/why_truth_and/

[←138]

This particular kick at Yudkowsky deserves some unpacking, given the nontrivial number of neuroatypical/autistic folks who hang out in the greater circle of Yudkowskian rationalism. A persistent description of autism includes the claim that neuroatypical people have an empathy deficiency. Given that there is also a strong and disturbing tradition of eugenicism against neuroatypicality, this quickly becomes a lurking basilisk for any argument that situates empathy as a fundamental aspect of humanity. There is, of course, no way to completely shut down this tendency, but there are two strong hedges available. First, it is productive to distinguish between empathy as a faculty and empathy as a value. The argument I pursue in the paragraphs to come is that it's important to *value* empathy. This, however, can be a slender reed—consider the weakness of the argument if one substitutes intelligence for empathy as a fundamental aspect of humanity. The inexorable pull of eugenicism clearly remains. In this regard the second hedge is far more useful: neuroatypical people don't actually have an empathy deficiency except in terms of neurotypical people; they're great at empathy for other neuroatypical people. Notably, this is the exact state of affairs for neurotypical people, whose empathy generally fails spectacularly to extend to neuroatypical people. The supposed empathy gap, in other words, is a consequence of the already existent dehumanization of neuroatypical people, whose interiority is tacitly considered less important than "normal" people. Framed this way, the "empathy gap" rhetoric quickly reveals itself to be another formulation of the bullshit logic whereby we are routinely asked to consider how hard it is for a rapist to lose his scholarship or for a cop who shot a black kid to deal with this, while the experiences of survivors or black people who fear the police are consistently minimized. None of this makes the specific formulation of "empathy is a fundamental part of humanity" any less prone to being twisted by anti-autism eugenicists, and the issue requires consistent attentiveness. That's how basilisks work. But it at least puts paid to the idea that this statement is in some sense inherently anti-neuroatypicality. Anyway, Yudkowsky himself has muttered with vague sympathy about links between race and IQ (http://lesswrong.com/lw/kk/why_are_individual_iq_differences_ok/), so his disciples can hardly get too bent out of shape over this basilisk.

[←139]

http://lesswrong.com/lw/hp/feeling_rational/

[←140]

http://www.vox.com/2015/8/10/9124145/effective-altruism-global-ai is a good overview of the problems that MIRI cultists have had and caused in the effective altruism movement. Notably, Yudkowsky himself has endorsed the "AI is more important than malaria nets" (which are what the mainstream EA crowd eventually settled on as the best bang for your charity buck) position in this interview: https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/ai-visionary-eliezer-yudkowsky-on-the-singularity-bayesian-brains-and-closet-goblins/

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[←142]

https://web.archive.org/web/20170419004208/http://www. dailystormer.com/committing-the-most-mortal-sin-of-religion-of-political-correctness/. I should note that, unlike the bulk of works cited in this book, the Daily Stormer is not a site that attempts to make white supremacism look cuddly and respectable. It's full out "fuck yeah swastikas" racism.

[←143]

Oh, fine, let's deal with the question of what the election of Trump does or doesn't change about this book's argument. Much of what I have to say on the subject of Trump is said in "Theses on a President," but strictly in terms of the concerns of the main text, both Yudkowsky and Moldbug spoke out against Trump, Yudkowsky fairly passionately (though mixed with bewilderment at his patron Thiel's support for him), Moldbug in passing and with typical disingenuousness (Yudkowsky: https://www.facebook.com/yudkowsky/posts/10154650743819228 and Moldbug: https://medium.com/@curtis.yarvin/why-you-should-come-to-lambdaconf-anyway-35ff8cd4fb9d); Nick Land, on the other hand, reacted to Trump's election with a mix of openly elated schadenfreude and cautionary dread. First and foremost, he views it as the point where the Cathedral became terminally discredited, which strikes me as optimistic but plausible. Certainly Clinton is the most archetypically Cathedral politician it's possible to imagine, and her defeat at the hands of an idiot proto-fascist suggests a populist dismissal of the liberal consensus. The Cathedral is too big a beast to simply lay down and die politely, but the wound could well be mortal. Even if it's not, there's an obvious sense that the events that will end up characterizing the 21st century are now underway. A major historical shift is inexorably in progress, and long term major historical shifts will necessarily result in the destruction of the established order.

Land's pessimism is in many ways more interesting. (Quelle surprise.) In an unguarded moment on Twitter he predicted a leftist wave in the 2020s moving towards communism through automation. Again, plausible—certainly it's a pretty safe bet that a leftward correction is going to follow Trump in some sense. I'd say "Gentlemen, start your hyperstitions," but mine is already underway and has an insurmountable lead, so I'm afraid you'll just have to follow along. (Speaking of which, another book recommendation: Peter Grey's *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*.)

But in all of this it's worth sounding a note of grim optimism. The authoritarian turn that Trump represents was in most regards inevitable. At least within American politics, the successful hijacking of one of the two parties by its most extremist elements was always going to result in a situation like this eventually. The far right could simply wait for the inevitable moment when the Democrats fell from power and, as the only remaining alternative, take over. But 2016 was by most accounts a bit early for it. Indeed, the leftist wave Land predicts for the 2020s is largely there because that spot in the historical schedule was unexpectedly vacated by the authoritarian turn Kleio had previously penciled in.

Perhaps more to the point, if you're designing an authoritarian turn with an eye towards the future, Trump isn't who you were going to pick. Those savvy enough to think in terms of "design" here—and see the final essay on Peter Thiel in this regard—seem to have largely seen Trump as a trial balloon useful in identifying core supporters who could be primed for a more serious far-right candidate later. Instead, on the basis of an unexpectedly effective voter suppression effort in Wisconsin and North Carolina, they've been rushed into production with a bug-ridden prototype that's in no way fit for purpose.

Put another way, from a long game perspective, imagining the history of the 21st century from, say, 2065 (a year I don't expect to see), and with the assumption that some kind of authoritarian turn of the sort prophesized by Land was inevitable in the first third of the 21st century, Trump is very possibly the best case. He spared the left the discrediting experience that a Clinton presidency would have been, forced the right to make their big move prematurely, and saddled them with an incompetent buffoon controlled primarily by his own easily exploited psychopathologies. For all that I'm deeply skeptical of accelerationism, in the face of the ticking clock of the anthropocene the trimming of a decade or so from Kleio's script seems likely to have decreased the odds that we are, in fact, fucked, at least in the full extinction sense. (Assuming, at least, that runaway climate change was a foregone conclusion, which it probably was given

Clinton's weakness on the issue.) All of which said, it's hard to argue that Trump's election makes this book's initial premise less valid.

[←144]

https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/216/give-the-people-what-they-want

[←145]

http://www.xenosystems.net/a-correction/

[←146]

Hannibal Season 3, Episode 10: "…And the Woman Clothed in Sun"

[←147]

http://salvage.zone/in-print/on-social-sadism/

[←148]

http://www.xenosystems.net/a-correction/

[←149]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/04/formalist-manifesto-originally-posted.html

[←150]

http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2010/01/mencius-moldbug-babysitting-fund.html

[←152]

Ibid

[←153]

Specifically his letter to Thomas Butts on 22 November 1802.